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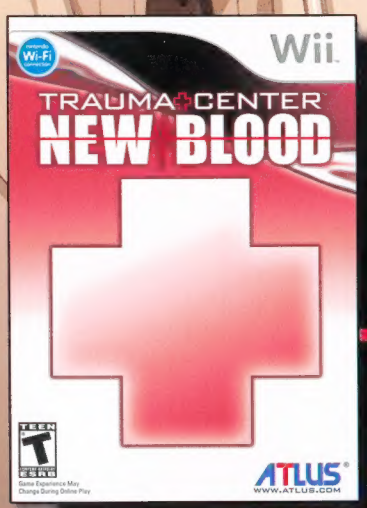

PLAY

TEEN
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Drug Reference
Mild Language
Mild Violence

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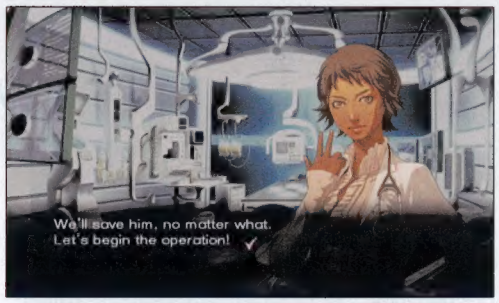

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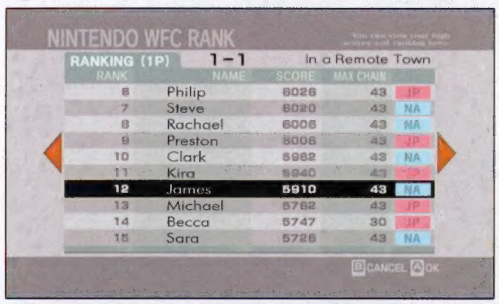
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1-1
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9 Preston 6006 43 JP
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11 Kira 5940 43 JP
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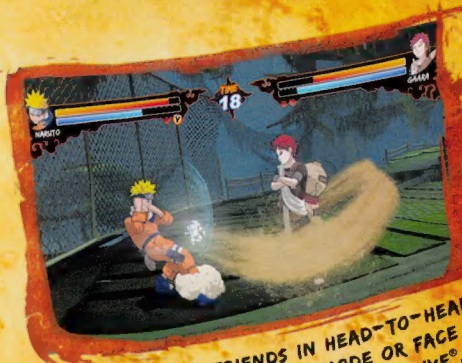

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Letter from the Editor

Super Nintendo

A funny thing happened while we were closing the issue this month. During our proofing process—yes, we have one—our copy editor came into my office confused as to why I go from mentioning how certain Wii games really belong on 360 or PS3 to unbridled praise reviewing Battalion Wars 2 and Super Mario Galaxy within the span of a few pages. I of course fired him immediately (heh).

...I find myself in a most peculiar position these days. I love Nintendo games; always have, always will. First-party Nintendo games helped shape the industry and my passion for games early on. But when it comes to third-party Wii games, I've become disillusioned to say the least. It was widely reported prior to launch that the Wii was comparable to a more powerful Xbox, technologically falling somewhere between the generations. Coming off of Conker's Bad Fur Day, Halo 2, Fable, and Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, that seemed just fine to me, especially given the price and that it was also reported that the system would be super easy for developers to tap. Playing through my initial batch of Wii games this month, however—weeks before Mario and Battalion Wars 2 arrived—I finally came to the conclusion that the Wii was closer to the PS2 than the Xbox (even though it hadn't produced a game graphically on par with God of War). It's certainly no Xbox. Realizing this manifested itself in a bit of venting, coming to terms with the fact that the leading console in the "next-gen" race isn't next-gen at all, meaning I'll be seeing fewer games like Uncharted—which is so gorgeous it nearly brought me to tears—and a lot more Wii games made on the cheap. Not that Microsoft and Sony won't be just fine and crank out plenty of great games, it just sucks when I see games that clearly belong on 360 or PS3 produced for the Wii instead, like Soulcalibur Legends or Sonic Riders Zero Gravity—two games that would be immensely better given the 360 or PS3 treatment. At least that's how I felt right up until Super Mario Galaxy arrived. What the? It's thoroughly next-gen, only in a distinctly Nintendo manner, just like what I'd imagined based on the early hype. So the Wii really is powerful? Third parties have been pumping out sub-par software because casual gamers and kids don't know any better? Or is it really so difficult to develop on that only Nintendo can make it perform? That's the bug up my butt. I could have gone back and re-written parts of my prior articles but that's just not how I roll. It's how I felt at the time, and everything in this industry is time sensitive. While we're on the subject, all Wii games should include the option to use the Wii control pad (such a cool little pad). The novelty of the Wiimote and dumbchuk has worn off. Can I go back to my controller now? Some games are great with the Wiimote and Nunchuck—some aren't. But that should be for the user to decide. And finally: Wii covers are coming. We've just been waiting for the right games.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29229 Canwood St., Suite 200, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 6, Issue 12. Single issue rates: $5.99, yearly newsstand value: $71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is $19.99 in the U.S., $44.99 in Canada, and $64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. Send address changes to: P.O. BOX 16567, North Hollywood, CA 91615-9684 or email play@espcomp.com For subscription service questions, call (800)694-6506. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax].

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Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Use of Tobacco
Violence
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What's back there?

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Activation Cost–The Mana cost to rotate a creature or initiate attacks with previously summoned creatures

Set & Rarity Icon–Designates card rarity and which card set it belongs to

Hit Points–Define the creature's toughness when placed on a neutral field

Infernal Sciondar Dragon
7
4
8
5
Dragon / Dhees Empire
No.013
Infernal Sciondar Dragon's Attack is equal to 5 plus the number of other Fire creatures on the board.
While Infernal Sciondar Dragon is on a Fire field, its Activation Cost to attack is 3 less than listed.

Attack Power–Denotes the amount of damage this creature inflicts when attacking

Ability Text–Describes special abilities, allied benefits, restrictions and global effects.

Tracking Icons–Markers that the PLAYSTATION®Eye tracks to determine each card's placement and orientation.

Defense Zones Icon–Displays counter-attack direction(s) and vulnerable Blind Zone(s).

Attack Zones Icon–Indicates the direction(s) of attack and affected field(s)

playback

December 2007

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A very, very, very long time ago, a debate regarding the truthfulness of art arose between a teacher and his student. The teacher believed that all art, of every kind, was a misrepresentation of the world and therefore immoral because it misled the common person into believing things that were untrue; essentially, he considered art a form of lying. On the other hand, the student, who later became a famous teacher as well, believed that art represented an ideal vision of the world; real art, he thought, was an idea of how things ought to be. Both had a profound philosophy to back up their viewpoint and the issue was not settled by the time both Plato, the teacher, and Aristotle, the student, had grown old and died.

Far more recently, a game was released that featured, as the protagonist, a busty, angelic, super woman. With an impossibly large sword, which she can wield like a feather, she is able to slay numerous enemies with a flow that can only be defined as beautifully ruthless. It doesn't matter which game I'm referring to or even if such a game actually exists. This character, this fantasy woman, is the femme fatale.

Plato's objection, if he weren't dead, to this sort of portrayal would be obvious: no such woman could exist and therefore the game is a falsehood that only serves to screw up the perception of the dull masses. Aristotle, on the other hand, would stick to his guns, but object as well. He might say that this character and game, while attractive, is simply not representative of an ideal world. In other words, he wouldn't call it art.

Two ancient thinkers, widely accepted as two of the most important philosophers in history, are reaching from beyond the grave to condemn gaming, and while we might attempt to brush away the implications of their implied judgments, there should be a part of us that's bothered by the fact that the founders of western thinking probably wouldn't like our games.

Okay, so maybe you're not bothered whatsoever by two dead guys dumping on your good time. Maybe gaming to you is merely entertainment, and you could care less that the general public regards you and all gamers as lazy nerds with time to kill because you have almost no friends. I, however, am tired of the stigma, the secrets, and the lies that come with gaming.If you're like me, an adult gamer, then you know of what I write. Despite any rumors, you do have friends; some of them game and some of them do not. With those that "do," we are open and free to talk, away from public ears, about the latest games, reviews, and intricacies of our hobby.

The situation is far different when we're with those who "don't." Probably, the topic of video games doesn't come up, but if it does and you happen to mention that you game, the result from the "normals" plays out something like this: A pause that may or may not be punctuated awkwardly with a scrunched up or judgmental expression that is followed by the words, "Oh, you play video games?" You might not realize it, but you've just dropped a notch on that person's respectability meter.

What is the solution? How do gamers shake this unfortunate reputation? The answer, if you hadn't already guessed, has much to do with dealing with the so called implied objections of the dead masters, such as Plato and Aristotle. If we apply games to the ongoing and very old philosophical debates regarding art, among other topics, we can then build for gaming, as a subject, a credibility that is the equal of film study or maybe even reading.

Of course, the major drawback to entering video games into academic standards, as vague as they are, is the fact that most games will only find condemnation instead of the praise that would increase respectability for gaming. The femme fatale I mentioned earlier is a strong example of what I'm getting at. This character is attractive and a lot of effort has been put forth in creating her. However, she's also purely stock; there's nothing truly unique about the character as we've seen her in other mediums and genres numerous times before. Plus, it's obvious that she's just another representation of an outrageous male fantasy.

To overcome this general condemnation that we, the gamers, have been receiving and will continue to receive, the standard of game content must improve in areas of originality and overall plot structure. No matter how difficult the task may be, video game protagonists must be original; they must, at the very least, possess a combination of traits that is either a new take on a traditional character type or really be somebody gamers have never met before.

Moreover, these original characters must be interposed into video game plots that go beyond the player's simple victory over the game. Traditional tragedy, which includes the hubris, ascent, and descent of the protagonist, is the best way, in my opinion, to inject a message into the content that escapes the screen into the player's actual life. Applicability of an artwork to what is vaguely defined as the "real world" is usually grounds for justification, on the basis of a utilitarian ideal, of viewing, experiencing, and yes, playing of said artwork.

To please two dead scholars and gain respectability for gaming and ourselves, the gamers, we must first enter the debate and get real about the content we're interacting with. If there's nothing out there, no game that meets some kind of standard of originality, then we of the gaming community must accept it and try to do better down the road.

At the very least, if we take this sort of approach, we can then argue with the general public that we're approaching our hobby critically and while we're not deriving much of any philosophical or practical value from the games we play, for now, we're at least searching (and hoping) for better things to come. Plus, we'll be able to say that we're watching and playing our female protagonists, our femme fatales, for reasons that aren't just perverted. So do your community (and me) a service, and think while you play.

"do your community a service, and think while you play."

kp

Parody Problems

Has Rockstar Games become the Gweneth Paltrow of the video game industry? With Rockstar Games' complaints regarding EA's parody of Grand Theft Auto in the Simpsons game, has Rockstar reached this point? Back when *Scary Movie* was released, the film *Shakespeare in Love* was ridiculed for the purposes of comedy being that both movies were done through Miramax studios. Gweneth Paltrow, being Miramax's golden girl cried foul and that scene was edited accordingly. The only way to have seen the movie in its original form was to have seen it in the theater when it was first released. With Rockstar Games following suit, what's next? There have been so many bad parodies such as *Date Move* and *Epic Movie*. Nobody complained, just customers who refused to pay for the junk. When parodies are done right, they can be amazing such as *Hot Fuzz* and *Scary Movie*. Rockstar has sunk to a new low for me and has soured me on their once good name. I will be complaining with my pocket book and spending my hard earned money on more deserving companies.

Phil H

Tacky Trends

I wanted to vent a little bit of frustration through your magazine in regards to a couple of trends that I have seen lately in the gaming industry. I have been an avid gamer now for 25 years and have noticed lately that many of the instruction booklets and backs of game boxes have up to three languages on the back of the box (thank you Nintendo) and within the manual. This is something that I can do without when I sit down and try to enjoy the manual (yes, some of us do still enjoy great manuals and box art). And second, it seems that every time I buy a new game (mostly for the PSP, PS3 and XBOX 360), I have to wait through a friggin update for the system. Now, I understand that they have to take certain precautions to keep people from hacking their respective systems....but when I buy the damn game, I want to play it then....not ten to twenty minutes later after my system has reset itself!!!

Jason S.

Rise of a spoiler...

First I'd like to say that I read a lot of gaming magazines and yours is one of my favorites but that aside I did find something extremely amusing in your—I'm assuming it's your—November issue and that was the huge spoiler you dropped (by accident I hope) in your preview of Naruto: Rise of a Ninja. Assuming that not every reader of your magazine reads the fan translations of the current issues of the Naruto manga, then telling all of your readers that the 4th Hokage is Naruto's father is one the biggest spoilers I've ever seen; considering the fact that that little tidbit of information isn't in fact revealed until much, much, much later on in the story. Maybe next time you'll give spoiler warnings. Then again I just find it funny. Keep on doing what you do.

Sincerely Kyle H.

...I don't watch Naruto religiously. I pulled this from the game's opening cinema. They drop this tidbit before you even pick up the controller. Believe it. -DH

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Crude Humor
Mild Violence
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The PS2 turns 7

Happy Birthday! Now go away!

Even though it's been seven years since PlayStation 2 was released, the system is still selling like hotcakes. Sure, hotcakes aren't as popular as they used to be, but...most of us are still hungry. According to Sony, there have been more than 120 million hardware units sold, making it the best-selling gaming platform ever released. What's more, after a couple hardware revisions, Sony released the Playstation Two—a model so thin, you can almost hide it behind the controller. This accounts for the huge success rate of the system; most people bought one and then lost it in their house.

With over 160 games coming out by the end of March 2008, the PS2's software lineup is almost as strong as the PlayStation 3's. And these are big games—Manhunt 2, Guitar Hero 3, Rock Band—titles like this are what keep the PS2 going. One wonders when Sony is going to decide to give up on the PS3 and head back to the richer waters of PlayStation 2 development. The price and size of the system continues to decrease, leading this journalist to speculate that by 2015, you'll be able to insert a PlayStation Two into your wrist, and play from the comfort of everywhere.

"While today's anniversary celebrates PlayStation 2's past, we're very excited for its future," said Jack Tretton. "We look forward to the platform's continued growth and expect to sell approximately 12 million units worldwide by the end of March, leading us to anticipate that PlayStation 2's lifecycle will exceed that of the original PlayStation. Never before has an in-home game system experienced this type of worldwide success on such a long-lasting scale."

Unless you count the original Nintendo, which some of our buddies are still playing. All joking aside, this baby changed our lives. Happy Birthday you beauty!

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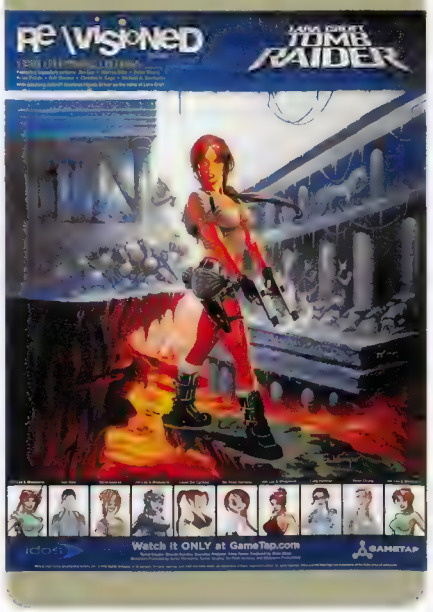


HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT
A LITTLE LESS HUMAN

NPD Group

database

December 2007

Top 10 SKU's September 2007

01	Halo 3	Xbox360	Microsoft
02	Wii Play w/remote	Wii	NoA
03	Legend of Zelda: PH	NDS	NoA
04	Madden NFL 2008	PS2	EA
05	Skate	Xbox 360	EA
06	Madden NFL 2008	Xbox 360	EA
07	Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	Wii	NoA
08	BioShock	Xbox 360	Take 2
09	Brain Age 2	NDS	NoA
10	Heavenly Sword	PS3	SCEA

SEPTEMBER Hardware Sales

Nintendo DS	495,000
Nintendo Wii	501,000
Xbox 360	527,000
PlayStation 2	215,000
PSP	284,000
PlayStation 3	120,000

02 Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass
Noa **NDS**

10 Heavenly Sword
SCEA **PS3**

"...easily the PlayStation 3 (system)'s premiere, must-have title."

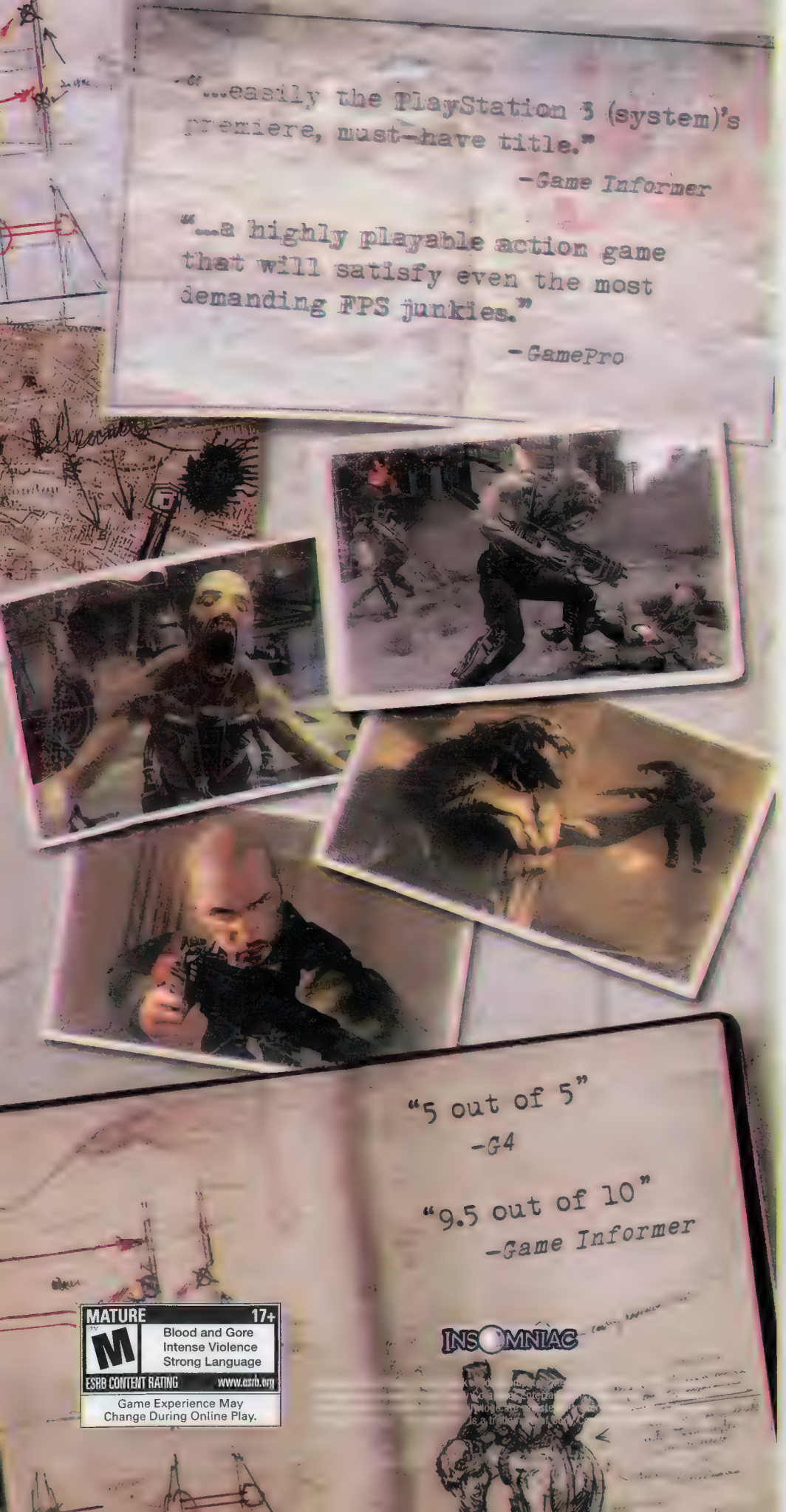
-Game Informer

"...a highly playable action game that will satisfy even the most demanding FPS junkies."

-GamePro

"5 out of 5"
-G4

"9.5 out of 10"
-Game Informer



R F O M . C O M

RESISTANCE
FALL OF MAN

Welcome to Earth, circa 1951. The Chimera, a horrific species of unknown origin, have overrun Russia and most of Europe. And now they're threatening the entire planet. Armed with an arsenal of unique and deadly weapons, you and your fellow soldiers represent humanity's last hope.

CELL BROADBAND MICROPROCESSOR

PLAYSTATION 3 system's unique microprocessor architecture enables sophisticated battles – advanced enemy AI, physics-based weapons and destructible environments.

PLAYSTATION NETWORK

Join an unparalleled online community – form clans, battle other clans in unrivaled matches featuring up to 40 players, and stay informed with comprehensive player rankings.

PLAY BEYOND

ONLY ON PLAYSTATION 3

MATURE 17+
M
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game Experience May Change During Online Play.

INSOMNIAC

The Lines Are Drawn...

Crimea

Delbray

Arbor

Zarzi

Gallia

Soze

Goldoa

Myron

Ter

These years ago Queen Elincia of Crimea won the war against the Mad King Ashnard of Begnion, but the Crimean kingdom's unity (and even world) within Crimea's own borders like and the Great Marquess has passed on, Four themselves facing an old threat.

Canteus

bal

The Begnion Orders unite to seek justice for a recent king assassinated. They are led by Ike Crimea, an orphaned guardsman to the throne of Gallia. Can he Mare his thirst for battle long enough to see his troops to victory and peace, or will his rage lead all nations to the brink of ruin?

Daglunt, king of Goldoa, warns that the chaos of war may threaten the land's covenant with an ancient god. He struggles to hold his nation to its pledge of neutrality even as the events surrounding him lead the world to the brink of ruin.

Tibarn and Naesala put aside their differences to lead their clans to war. The raven king, however, carries a secret burden that may cause their alliance to crumble–and seal the fate of their cause.

Fantasy Violence
Mild Language

Wii

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Marado
Daein
Sella
Nebula
Nox
Culbert
Seliora
Gaddos
Persis
Tanas
Begnion
...But Every Story Has Two Sides.
With King Ashnard's death, Daein fell under the harsh rule of the Begnion Empire. Years later, Micaiah, Sothe, and the Dawn Brigade have taken up the struggle to liberate Daein. They pin their hopes on rightful Prince Ike, but can this mysterious youth rally them to rise up against her tyranny?
Begnion's senators now rule Daein. They have given their military commanders free rein, all the while hiding their actions from the Apostle Sanaki. Beset by turmoil at home and abroad, Sanaki seems fated to be her nation's last apostle. Is Zelgius's sword enough to help her save all she holds dear?
Two Sides to Every War.
In a war fueled by chaos, who can say what is right and wrong? In a Fire Emblem first, you will play both sides of the war and judge for yourself. Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn introduces a host of new features that make it a snap to pick up and a challenge to beat.
Wii
FIRE EMBLEM
RADIANT DAWN
You can't allow anyone to know what you can do. Hearing without any bones or staves is a rare gift—almost unheard of.

Turok

A brand new dinosaur hunter emerges from the fog

words Casey Loe

When we last saw Turok, he was battling racist, dinosaur-riding cyborg Tobias Bruckner at the end of the 2002's moderately ridiculous Turok: Evolution. Ah, how times have changed. The campy-yet-charming Turok that we knew and loved (well, sort of) is long gone. Instead, Touchstone's dramatic reinvention of the series begins with a grim, mohawked Turok awakening from a sleep chamber on an interstellar military vessel, moments before a missile attack sends it crashing onto the surface of an alien world.

The new Turok's production values are phenomenal from the moment you press start on your Xbox 360 or PS3. The crash sequence is a fine exhibition of next-gen lightning effects and ultra-detailed Unreal Engine 3.0 textures, and the world on which Turok lands is a visual feast, so richly layered with moss and ferns, hanging vines and puffs of mist that it's a challenge just to visually process it all. This is a stunningly beautiful game, packing Gears of War-levels of detail into vast rainforests that seem to stretch for miles.

But Turok was born in an era when first-person shooters were still a novelty, and those days are long past. As good as it looks, and as good as it feels, how much can a reinvention of a Nintendo-64-era franchise have to offer in the Halo-Bioshock-Half-Life-CoD world of today? Surprisingly, quite a bit. Touchstone sent us a nearly final Xbox 360 version of Turok's Story Mode, and it's provided three good reasons to make room on the shelf for one more next-gen sci-fi FPS:

"THE CAMPY-YET-CHARMING TUROK THAT WE KNEW AND LOVED (WELL, SORT OF) IS LONG GONE."

1 Dinosaurs. Motherf***ing dinosaurs.

The developers of the classic Turok games weren't exactly aiming for realism. In fact, paleontologists believe that few—if any—dinosaurs actually wielded back-mounted rocket launchers. While the developers of the re-imagined Turok haven't constrained themselves to scientific fact (some of its coolest critters are original designs), they have successfully transformed the dinosaurs from Saturday-morning-cartoon monsters to living beings that realistically pursue their own dinosaur agendas, completely oblivious to the fact that they were created to be obstacles for some video game hero. Sure, they'll try to kill you (the carnivores among them, at least), but it's clearly nothing personal. They'll happily strike at the enemy army or even weaker dinosaurs, providing a treasure trove of strategic possibilities. For example, if you have a deadly Carnotaurus on your tail, you can lead it into a pack of raptors and blast it to pieces while it's preoccupied with easier prey. You can also guide bloodthirsty dinos towards enemy encampments by firing off a few flares (dinosaurs love 'em! Who knew?), and then sit back and snipe as they kill each other, picking off members of the winning team to keep the fight fair. Artificial intelligence is an odd term to throw around when discussing dinosaurs, since they're somewhat legendary for being stupid, so let's just say that the dinosaurs in Turok are stupid in the most believable and satisfying ways.

They look pretty amazing too. Their bumpy matte textures look right at home in Turok's lushly vegetated worlds, and even change to reflect the wounds they take in the course of combat. But the animation is where they shine most: The dinosaurs move with a terrifying confidence as they slink through tall grass or leap off of trees to sink their teeth into Turok, but their movements are no less impressive when they stumble and flail in response to your attacks. Fast, ruthless, but amusingly off-balance, dinosaurs behave like no traditional FPS foe. When fighting them,

Turok and company arrive at the crash site...

Jurassic Park this isn't.

"TUROK'S TRUEST LOVE IS HIS SIMPLE HUNTING KNIFE, WHICH HE CAN USE TO KILL ANY STANDARD ENEMY IN A SINGLE SILENT, GRUESOME STRIKE."

it's leg shots that seem to help most, as a good hit will break their charges and send them tumbling in the dirt.

2 The new Turok is a Phenomenal Badass.

As you may have noticed, our favorite Native-American warrior (you heard me, dude-from-Prey) has shaved his head, shot a cubic ton of horse steroids, and joined the Space Marines. It's not the most inspired design choice, but that's to be expected; it's a well-documented design flaw that the only humans the Unreal Engine can render are mostly-bald space marines with arms and necks thicker than their heads. But what saves Joseph Turok from being a total cliché is what a phenomenal badass he truly is. Sure, he can dual-wield 40-pound plasma rifles, but Turok's truest love is his simple hunting knife, which he can use to kill any standard enemy in a single silent, gruesome strike. A successful knife attack will trigger an animation sequence in which Turok buries his blade in some poor chump's back, smashes it through a lurker's skull, or snaps a raptor's spine over his knee. Pulling off these moves will require a bit of stealth, or at least good timing (you can do them after side-stepping a dinosaur's lunge, for example) but they're well worth the trouble. The visceral thrills aren't the only reward; you'll be immune to enemy attacks as you gut your prey, and they take just long enough for Turok to regenerate most of his lost health.

It's no wonder that Turok is such a badass with the knife, since he was trained by Roland Kane, the leader of the game's villainous paramilitary organization. All you need to know about Kane is that he scored Powers Boothe—of *Deadwood*, *24*, and *Sin City* fame—as his voice actor. So: pretty scary guy. The voice cast also includes Boothe's old Deadwood nemesis, Timothy Olyphant, as well as Ron Perlman, Donnie Wahlberg, and William Fichtner, although most of them don't get much more to work with than standard action-movie lines like "We may be stuck together, but that doesn't mean I have to like it." Ah well. It's still got Tobias Bruckner's dialogue beat.

3 You Can Play it However the Hell You Want.

Sneaking through the grass to knife your prey doesn't sound appealing? Then don't ever do it. The coolest thing about Turok is that it never forces you to use any of its mechanics; you can rush from checkpoint to checkpoint with guns blazing, stake out some high ground and painstakingly snipe everything with a pulse, or stealth your way through with the knife and bow. As for the dinosaurs, you can shoot 'em, stab 'em, or sic 'em on your foes. The implications of choosing one strategy over another can be quite interesting; for example, stealth kills don't just eliminate the human enemies you see, they potentially prevent them from summoning reinforcements. And a guns-blazing approach can spook even herbivorous dinosaurs, triggering a dangerous (to your foes) stampede. It's nice to have options beyond "assault rifle or shotgun?"

There's clearly a lot to like about the new Turok, but it's too soon to tell how it will ultimately shape up…I mean, except for the fact that our version runs silkily smooth, is completely bug-free, and is playable from start to finish. But, you know, this is just a "preview" and I'm supposed to pretend that we haven't formed an opinion yet, so I'll have to leave you with something vaguely noncommittal like, "At the moment, Turok's Story Mode is looking promising."

As for multiplayer, we legitimately have no clue—it was still being tweaked as of press time. We do know that while it won't be possible to play through Story Mode in co-op, there will be three separate co-op maps that can be played online with up to four-players. There are another seven maps for the competitive multiplayer modes, which include Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, Capture the Flag, Assault Capture the Flag, and War Games. War Games sounds like the most interesting of the bunch, assigning each team a series of objectives that include hacking computers, planting bombs, defusing the other teams' bombs, and collecting power cores. The first team to complete their mission wins, forcing the teams to split their time between doing their job and interfering with their rivals. The other modes sounds like fairly traditional stuff, but if there's one clear lesson we've learned from Turok, it's that everything's more interesting when you throw in a bunch of short-tempered dinosaurs.

Turok — preview

System(s)	Xbox 360/PS3
Developer	Propaganda
Publisher	Touchstone
Available	February 5

Turok

INTERVIEWS

JOEL MANNERS Game Director

play: Is their any blood relation between this Turok's or is this a complete series reboot?
Joel Manners: None at all. Turok takes place approximately 200 years in the future. The main character is Joseph Turok, a soldier trained in black ops and commando warfare who is on a mission to bring to justice his mentor, a man named Roland Kane. Kane is now a war criminal and fugitive who has taken refuge on a remote planet.

Did you refer to any of the past games or just start from scratch?
The number one goal we had for Turok was to re-imagine the franchise as a next-generation game. That means taking the core of a great IP and creating a new experience and a new game around it.

Turok certainly has its fans, but what would you say to the many potential fans who never owned a Nintendo 64 or, worse yet, view the franchise negatively because of its weaker later releases?
Turok is a fun and exciting next-generation game that stands on its own. Hopefully fans of earlier incarnations will see the core of something they liked brought forward again, but you don't have to love the older games to enjoy Turok, and if you are a fan of the original, you will see a re-imagining of the heart of what you enjoyed the first time.

So what happened in the future to make everyone so absurdly buff? And what happened to all the women?
The main characters in Turok are members of an elite military outfit named Whiskey Company who are assigned the mission of journeying to this remote planet and bringing to justice one of the most notorious and brilliant military commanders in existence, Roland Kane. Whiskey is not just a standard infantry outfit, so capturing the look and feel of elite, hard-nosed, veteran soldiers was critical for us.
As we went through the process of choosing our favorite and coolest characters, I guess we did end up with an all-male cast, although it certainly wasn't intentional. We had some female characters that unfortunately ended up on the cutting-room floor, but they are still out there!

Can you run down the multiplayer modes that will be initially available?
We have a ton of great multiplayer modes for players to jump into for head-to-head action. There are classic modes like Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch, plus we have Capture the Flag and a mode called Assault Capture the Flag where the teams take turns defending a base from an assault by the other team. We also have a mode called War Games which is really cool. War Games gives each team a series of tactical objectives to accomplish during the match, and the first team to do so wins. It's very much like a mission that you have to complete while battling an enemy who wants to achieve the same thing. Each map has different rules and objectives.

"WE HAVE A TON OF GREAT MULTIPLAYER MODES FOR PLAYERS TO JUMP INTO FOR HEAD-TO-HEAD ACTION.."

We also have a Co-Op mode where players can play together to complete a mission against AI. The Co-Op missions are only for Co-Op mode, so they are unique missions that you will not encounter in Campaign Mode.

Will the player have any ability to give orders to his AI partners? If not, how will you keep them from getting in the way when a player wants to pursue stealth tactics, for example?
We wanted the action to stay centered around playing Turok, so we didn't make the player have to worry about ordering his companions around. They will frequently hang back when the group first enters an area to see how the player wants to proceed. The character Turok is a specialist in scouting and black ops tactics and they know that, so they will wait for Turok to make the first move on how to approach an encounter. They will wait if the player wants to move into an area by himself and scout ahead, and come running when the bullets start flying.

Drivable vehicles were shown when the game was first announced, but haven't been seen since. Are they still a part of the game?
We looked long and hard at drivable vehicles during the development of Turok and in the end we decided to take them out. It was a really hard decision because a lot of work had gone into them, and they were very fun to drive and use. The downside was that it just felt like a different game than the rest of the game.
Turok is a very intense predator-versus-prey experience. You are moving through dense jungles, invading man-made complexes, and clambering through underground caverns, and at any moment you might find yourself either the hunter or the hunted. More and more we found ourselves taking vehicles away from the environments because they simply didn't fit in with the rest of the experience, to the point where they were really more of a hindrance than a help.
Now, that isn't to say that there are no vehicles at all in the game, just not drivable ones. Kane's army is well-equipped and uses vehicles for transport and for battle, so you will find yourself up against war machines in your fight to survive.

JOSH BRIDGE Lead Level Designer

How long of a single-player quest are you aiming for?
For the average player the game is coming in around 12-14 hours for the single-player story mode. It is always a difficult thing to predict exactly where you will come in for play length, but we first focused on creating a fun single-player quest before deciding on a play-time target. Since a lot of our areas are more free form without an explicitly required "gate" to open, it really depends on how much the player explores or simply owns at blowing away the baddies.

"THERE ARE SEVERAL FACTORS THAT IMPACT HOW THE LEVEL PLAYS OUT, SO THE EXPERIENCE COULD BE DIFFERENT ON REPLAY..."

How does the emphasis on A.I. change the Turok experience on subsequent play-throughs?
Replayability is really important to us. It was one of the motivating factors when it came time to design the AI system along with the levels. I personally love experiencing a game for the first time. So we put a lot of effort into creating spaces and AI that allowed for a more dynamic play experience on replay. In both cases you had to reach the same point in the world, but how you approached the situation, or the way you took to get there is as varied as your play style.

Sometimes after dying and continuing, certain enemies did not appear the next time, or appeared in smaller numbers. Are there random enemy patterns?
There are several factors that impact how the level plays out, so the experience could be different on replay. Some are random in that it depends if the dinosaur was nearby at that moment, or how you approached the area. The human enemies will call for reinforcements, so taking them out quietly plays differently than blasting them away announcing your presence. We put a lot of focus on creating a space that feels alive reacting to the player.

How will the day and night cycle come into play in multiplayer modes? Is that fixed by area or can that be set as a random factor?
The time of day is fixed by area. We had explored several ways to incorporate a more dynamic day and night cycle. When we firmed up our core gameplay direction, we made the decision to focus on polishing and refining that experience. In the end, a dynamic time of day system didn't end up being a part of the experience.

Will co-op be split-screen, or online-only? Why is it based on original maps when you usually have an AI partner with you in the single-player game?
Co-op is online only as we really wanted to push the look of the game as far as possible. Split-screen is cool, but we would have had to make a tremendous amount of changes to the experience that we didn't feel was worth exploring. We made the decision early on to separate the single-player story mode from the co-op missions. When you approach designing a single-player experience, the drama, staging and rules differ from co-op. By taking this approach we were able to give the two modes special attention and staging that creates an experience that plays to each of their strengths.

How will the original co-op maps fit into the storyline?
The story for the co-op missions takes you through several new areas of the planet that you didn't experience in the single-player portion of the game. You also explore some of the key locations from the single-player mission, but a different point in the story. For example, it may be at a point that Turok had already destroyed a base and they are in the process of rebuilding the damage that you caused.

JOSH HOLMES Studio GM

Was Propaganda created from the remnants of some other team? Have any of you worked on Turok in the past?
A bunch of us have worked together in the past on titles such as Def Jam: Fight For NY, Def Jam: Vendetta and NBA Street, as well as some unreleased original IP concepts. Since we founded the studio in 2005, Propaganda has grown to include some of the best talent in the industry. Members of our team have worked on some monster franchises like Splinter Cell, Battlefield, Prince of Persia, Metroid, Far Cry, Need for Speed, Quake and Bond, just to name a few. We're also lucky to have a couple of people on the team who have worked on past Turok titles and their experience has been a huge benefit in crafting this new game.

As a new team, how did you go about getting a game as high-profile and high-budget as Turok?
A mixture of luck and determination, really. We were fortunate to have a publisher who believed in us from the very beginning based on our collective track record. Their support helped us get the studio off the ground. When we heard that there might be a new Turok game, we devoted ourselves to developing and pitching an original concept for the property. We were really excited by the opportunity to revive the Turok franchise and that passion went a long way toward getting us the gig.

This is some amazing cast. Did you go into the project with the knowledge that your characters would be voiced by Hollywood A-listers?
The cast is terrific and in many ways it has been a dream come true. When we wrote the story, we had specific people in mind for many of the characters. To have those actors join the production and lend their talent to the game has resulted in some truly memorable performances.

The game seems to be basically finished... What will you be working on for the next few months?
We're pretty much done with the game on Xbox 360 at this point (knocks on wood). We're just wrapping up a few loose ends but the focus of the team has now shifted to PlayStation 3 optimization and ensuring that we are providing the best possible play experience on that platform. When the game releases in February, gamers will be treated to a fantastic experience regardless of the console they own.

We understand that Propaganda has a second project in development. Can you give us any hints? Franchise or new IP? 2008 or beyond?
We do indeed have a second project in development at Propaganda. Of course I can't talk about it. Nope, not at all. Except maybe to say that it's an Action/RPG title which will be totally awesome when it's done... ...which definitely won't be in 2008.

"THE CAST IS TERRIFIC AND IN MANY WAYS IT HAS BEEN A DREAM COME TRUE."

DARYL ANSELMO Director, Art

The dinosaur that climbs trees and walls was particularly impressive... Is that a wholly original design, or based on some existing creature?
Ahh yes, the Lurker. I remember we had some early production sketches of these mangy jungle cats, and this idea of a creature bouncing up from the ground into the trees that added verticality and this hit-and-run style gameplay, so we really had to have it. The problem it left us was grounding that idea in prehistory, so it really became a hybrid: "What would it be like to take a jungle cat and fuse it with a ferocious zombie dinosaur" and we took it from there.

Visually you seem to stay away from the shiny normal-mapped look. Purely a design choice?
At its core, Turok is shooting dinosaurs, in a jungle. It was really important that the dinosaurs and characters looked great in close-ups, since Turok has a lot of in-your-face action compared to other shooters where the battles take place in the mid-ground and further back. The Raptors, for example, have that shine and detail you expect from a next-gen game, and it really helps them pop. Specularity is a relatively new tool for the game artist, and it's easy to be seduced by the flavor of the day, so we couldn't abuse it. We focused our time and attention on bringing density to the jungles, and on the interactive grass.

"THE RAPTORS, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE THAT SHINE AND DETAIL YOU EXPECT FROM A NEXT-GEN GAME, AND IT REALLY HELPS THEM POP."

BRETT PASCAL Gameplay Animation Supervisor

What did you use as a reference for the animation of the dinosaurs?
We used a number of reference materials for the dinosaurs. First, we took a trip to see the ones in the zoo…er, we gathered footage of what others have *speculated* the motion would look like. Most obviously we studied the Jurassic Park franchise fairly extensively. We also looked at heaps of animal footage in general. Wild cats…lizards…birds, etc. Our initial reference was very grounded in animal reality.
From that initial phase, there were pretty much two different ways reference was handled. Some creatures' inspiration was drawn from existing animals, or in the case of dinos, existing takes on pre-existing animals. Others were mixes of inspiration. So in the case of the T-Rex, we kept it grounded in T-Rex references, adding our own touch to it. For our raptors, they were coming across a little flat as just "raptors"… and their AI design sort of reminded us of zombie behavior… so we leaned a little into films such as *Dawn of the Dead*, or *28 Days Later*. What we ended up with there was a hybrid of Jurassic versus zombie that plays pretty well. The other great example was our Lurker creature… which is sort of a club-sandwich reference approach. He's a little bit Komodo dragon, a little bit leopard (or any wildcat really), a little bit gecko, and a touch of rabid rottweiler. What was great about the reference was that the AI guys drew a lot from those concepts in designing the behaviors of the creatures in game. So in the end, there is a very cool variation in the creatures populating this world, both visually and behaviorally.

"MOST OBVIOUSLY WE STUDIED THE JURASSIC PARK FRANCHISE FAIRLY EXTENSIVELY."

JAYSEN HUCULAK Project Lead Engineer

The Unreal Engine has a reputation for excelling in small environments. But Turok has some incredibly vast environments. Is that a misconception, or did this require significant modifications to the engine?
We have done significant optimizations in the engine, both on the engineering side as well as on the content side to make our environments truly sing on the next generation platforms. When we were first looking into the Unreal Engine, we knew it was well known for small environments. Our team planned up front to do some heavy optimizations on the engine in order to really focus on nailing jungle environments that are really engaging to the player. The Unreal Engine was a great starting place for our team and we have had great support from Epic, Microsoft and Sony to really make their technologies work for our game.

"ASIDE FROM THE JUNGLE ENVIRONMENTS, OUR REAL CHALLENGE WAS MAKING AN AWESOME DINOSAUR EXPERIENCE"

Our team wrote several foliage systems for the game, one of which turned into a full fledged feature: dynamic grass. You will find pockets of this around and you can hide in it or see other characters moving through it, which is a great time to lob a grenade in and watch the chaos that ensues.
Aside from the Jungle environments, our real challenge was making an awesome dinosaur experience. Most games only have variants of standing biped characters. To get the massive dinosaurs looking good in our game we basically completely replaced the animation system in Unreal so we could handle the amount of animation blends and interactions between different characters. The Unreal Engine is a great base to build games off of, but to make it a unique experience you have to spend the time and effort to excel in what makes your product unique.

Are you anticipating any differences between the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions?
There will be slight differences between the two platforms, but largely our team has done an awesome job of bringing out a great product on both platforms. Our team has spent incredible effort to make sure the experience is as engaging on both platforms. From a playability standpoint, you shouldn't notice many difference between the platforms. Visually the two are almost identical as well. A few things ended up being implemented in different ways between the platforms so if you look closely you will notice a subtle difference in the motion blur, the HDR lighting, bloom and rim lighting, but largely this is caused by using the right technique for the specific hardware. The subtle visual difference is based on going about the same effect in a different method catering to the strengths of each platform.

TED CONLEY Lead Audio Designer

Using your surround sound to hear a dinosaur behind you is awesome, but what about players with crappy sound systems? Aren't they going to get hit from behind a lot?
Of course players with surround are going to have the advantage here. But when we fold down the 5.1 channels into stereo, we multiply the channels in a way that creates 3D imaging in stereo (it's like looking at a 3D object on a two dimensional screen), helping the player to interpret what is coming from behind and at what distance. Here's a tip: with a stereo setup, if you're not sure where a sound is coming from, quickly look to both sides, this will help determine what's in front and behind you.

DAVE SMITH Creature AI Engineer

The dinosaurs have some pretty incredible AI. Every time we play we seem to notice them doing something different... Can you give us a few examples of rare AI routines or dinosaur interactions we might not have noticed? For example, can you ever goad the docile herbivores into attacking?
When playing the game it's important to remember that the dinosaurs don't dislike Turok any more than his companions, his enemies or even sometimes, each other! A smart player will figure out how to make raptors fight amongst themselves. Creatures that live in dark environments might be afraid of bright light, so flares or a flamethrower can bring interesting new strategies to underground battles. And when fighting giant insect-like creatures, watch the walls… and the floors! And since you asked, spooked Hadrosaurs often seem to blunder into enemy soldiers as they flee…

TIM LEWINSON Associate Director, Creatures

I love taking those harmless little cute dinosaurs and snapping their spines over my thigh. Does that make me a bad person?
To the contrary, you're striking a blow for freedom. Those "cute" little mini-raptors, given half a chance, would burn down your home and eat your family at the first opportunity. They may seem relatively harmless one on one, but their preferred attack style is in packs, ripping and mauling you with hit and run attacks. Think of them as steroid-infused piranhas, but with a nastier disposition—damaging by themselves, but deadly in a swarm. Tread carefully, and crack raptor backs whenever possible.

What parameters will change in the harder difficulty modes?
Given that the AI is incredibly advanced, it was important to us at Propaganda that the harder difficulty modes go above and beyond just adding hit points. The MG soldiers react faster to your movement, dodging grenades, utilizing flanking maneuvers and pinning you with gun fire. They'll zero in on your position faster, and use increased accuracy to force you to make greater use of cover, sprinting from tree to tree to stay alive. The dinosaurs are an even bigger handful, thanks to better hearing and eyesight, and the ability to run you down at speed. Increased ferocity means that you'll be fighting to survive on the higher levels of difficulty, and ratcheting up the tension a hundred-fold. It's what increased difficulty should mean in all games—an increased challenge that forces the player to play smart, without resorting to cheapness. It's a delicate balance, and I think we've nailed it.

Will you be able to use one-hit knife kills against any non-boss enemy? Why did you decide to make melee attacks such a major part of the game?
You better believe it. In fact, we made a point of expanding our quiet kill system across the board because it's so incredibly satisfying. Turok already stands apart from other shooters thanks to our relentless dinosaurs and AI, but with the addition of knife kills, it really brings home the pure rawness of the game. When you stop and think about it, to consciously switch to a knife when facing down a 500 lb slavering raptor is insanity. Who in their right mind would do that, unless they have a rock-solid faith in their abilities to face off against nature, no matter what's thrown at him? We're rewarding the player who displays that skill by providing beautifully animated third-person viewpoints of these knife kills that are quick and seamlessly blend into the overall game experience. If you knife a raptor from the front, you're rewarded with one animation. From the side, you get yet another cool knife kill. And if you've got the chops to actually get behind a raptor, it's only fair and proper that you paint the screen red like Bob Ross.

"THOSE 'CUTE' LITTLE MINI-RAPTORS, GIVEN HALF A CHANCE, WOULD BURN DOWN YOUR HOME AND EAT YOUR FAMILY..."

We love tagging the dinosaurs with shotgun flares and doing selective sniping to keep dinosaur-versus-enemy-soldier fights fair. What are some other ways players can use the dinosaurs to their advantage?
Funny you should mention that. While dinosaurs and humans mix like oil and water, you can also use luring to set dinosaurs against each other. Hitting a dinosaur with a flare sets the attention of all the other dinos on that target, and that knowledge can buy you a short breather to retreat and reload.

How will the knife work in multiplayer? With no radar, it seems like it would be incredibly easy to slip behind people for easy kills.
Thanks to numerous rounds of balance testing and tuning, that isn't always the case. Your sound of movement is reduced with the knife equipped, and you move slightly faster than a player toting a rocket launcher, for example, but there are significant tradeoffs. Any player running with a knife equipped suffers a significant speed penalty when being shot, so you have to completely submerge yourself into that hunting mindset—staying to the shadows and tall grass, utilizing an economy of movement, and striking only when you're sure your target has no idea you're there. Taking on an armed opponent with only your knife is suicide for all but the most skilled Turok players, and using the dive roll to get out of the way of a stream of bullets will only take you so far. Knife kills are also based on timing and range, so if a target moves out of the way just as you're striking, not only will they hear you, but the upswing motion will leave you vulnerable and open to violent, bloody retribution. On the other hand, it behooves you to stay aware of your environment at all times, and have fellow squad members watch your back. In the world of Turok, a knife-wielding player within range means death.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Shock and awe

words Brady Fiechter

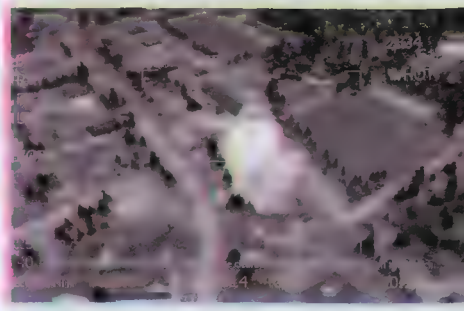
For a number of reasons, I wasn't able to play Call of Duty 4 till right before we closed our issue, missing out on the multiplayer component. Activision and Infinity Ward felt that scoring the game based on single-player alone would be incomplete.

I did finish the campaign, which I'm actually glad I don't have to affix a score to. Forget about a damned score and go play this game. Grant Collier, Infinity Ward president and studio head, told me after I shook his hand in reverence and walked out of their theater, this is easily the team's best work, and he is right.

Infinity Ward's best work equates to many factors, from raw engineering and gameplay design to scenario scripting and presentation. To struggle and dissect the inner workings of the game would be a disservice to its overall greatness without going through it again and paying closer attention to the details. Playing Call of Duty 4 for the first time, I wasn't aware of details or noticing the usual design constraints. A foreign experience and moments of real emotion overtook an awareness of playing a game. This is obviously a Call of Duty game, but the impact is new.

Taking a break from Call of Duty 4 and talking with Collier over lunch, I asked him if he could explain how they approached designing the sensation of firing the sniper rifle; he didn't really have a direct answer, other than the simple fact that the game is refined by the touch of masters of the genre.

It's awesome how right the shots felt,



Create your own war footage.

how slightly disturbing the blood splatter coming off a dead-shot rang in its impact. The game captures such moments of carnage and adrenaline that a part of me walked away a little introspective in the face of our modern times...

But playing the game feels so good and is so terrifically entertaining in the ways a great game should be, such thought is for another day. Worth discussion as well is why I never play games from the evil perspective, I never kill the innocent or make the dubious choice. In the awesomely staged level based around Chernobyl, the captain leading me stealthily through the high brush alerted me to the fact that I could either make a kill or just let the guard walk by with his life. I didn't hesitate and took the shot, and it felt good.

Call of Duty 4 is extremely linear in the most basic and misused sense of the word. I mention this in praise. There is an extreme urgency that is so well instilled into the progression that a higher level of freedom would have snapped the immersion. Often times you are very specifically led through an area; an important part of the engagement is being surrounded by troops and activity that are so well presented, they become captivating in their mere existence in the space. And then you start interacting with all this arresting detail through terrifically exciting, exceptionally designed pathways, realizing over and over that Call of Duty 4 is... Just go play it and experience for yourself.

"I didn't hesitate and took the shot, and it felt good."

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Infinity Ward
Publisher	Activision
Available	Nov 6

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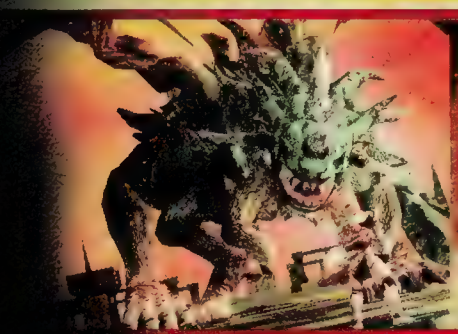

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TAKES ON A NEW DIMENSION

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Only on the Wii

Sonic Riders Zero Gravity

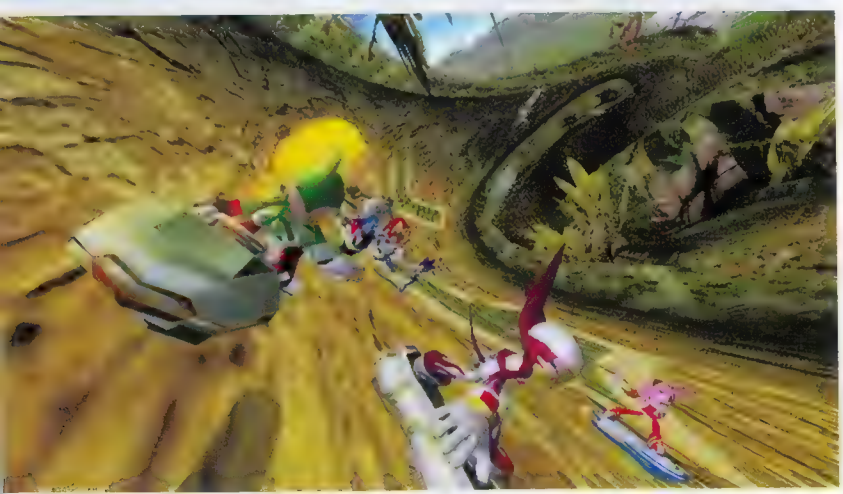
Back to the future

words Dave Halverson

The best game ever featuring an Echidna riding a futuristic peanut!

"...playing with the Wiimote can be hazardous to its health as it meets your wall at high velocity."

I have good news and bad news... The good news is that Sonic Riders is back and in many ways better than ever. The bad news—for 360 and PS3 Sonic owners at least—is that it remains a purely last-gen affair, limited to the PS2 and Wii, which, as the dust settles on the next-gen transition, seems apropos for a game aimed at a younger demographic as more kids own Wii than 360 and PS3 combined. Shame that technology's not its calling card. The Wii has managed to recruit throngs of casual gamers, kids, and Nintendo devotees (like me) that will go to their graves waving a Nintendo flag, without producing a single game in league with say, Conkers Bad Fur Day for Xbox. A tad unnerving for a system touted as being much more powerful. Am I wrong to be peeved that such a technologically challenged system is keeping games like this mired in the past? Would it have killed Nintendo to throw in some normal-mapping capabilities? That said, for what it is, Zero Gravity delivers another smile-inducing Sonic-infused scramble built around Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, and the very latest characters in the franchise including Jet, Wave, and Storm. The main game revolves around Story mode where the usual trite Sonic story—no matter the circumstance it can be rectified by placing first in the race ahead—acts as the gateway to each world's competition. It ain't Shakespeare, but it looks cool, and it's a good segue/diversion between venues. Where the game really takes off is on the wonderfully designed tracks that wind and snake through the skyways like great roller coasters. Littered with shortcuts, rings, rails, speed pads, trick zones, catapults, and various obstacles, they're as much action stages as they are racing, giving the game that distinct Sonic feel. But be warned—playing with the Wiimote can be hazardous to its health as it meets your wall at high velocity. The game's gravity controls are easily assimilated but precision steering is an altogether different story. There's just no way to be precise unless you do the sane thing and plug in a GameCube controller. The game controlled like a dream using my old Wavebird. As the name implies Zero Gravity also utilizes a Gravity Point System where peak performance in selected areas (trick zones, running starts, grind areas, etc.) earns you GP (Gravity Points), enabling you to engage various actions key to victory; the only way forward in Zero Gravity is by winning and the AI demands your undivided attention. Collecting rings also has its advantages, both on the track and off as the currency for purchasing gear in the shop. While Riders retains its reputation as the best Sonic spin-off to date it's a shame that it's not privy to the technology that would catapult it into the next generation. As an extension of its dated roots, however, it should deliver with flying colors.



preview

Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity	
System(s)	Wii/PS2
Developer	Sonic Team
Publisher	Sega
Available	Jan 8

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NEXON

Kingdom Under Fire Circle of Doom

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done...hopefully

words Dave Halverson

I became a Kingdom Under Fire fan all of about 30 seconds into the opening cinema of the first game in the series. Show me scantily clad female dark elves and vampires in a real-time medieval war against satanic hordes and I'll show you my undivided attention. I wasn't as wild about the follow up, but the original still holds a special place in my heart. Coming off of the spectacular spin-off, Ninety Nine Nights, I've been counting the days until CoD marks the series' first foray on 360. But as the game draws near I find myself more concerned than excited. The same issues I experienced months ago previewing the game are still plaguing the nearly completed version: the most annoying running sound effects of all time—it's like they're running over fields of Corn Flakes—and no walking animation... two problems that would all but kill the experience. With the RTS elements gone (Circle of Doom serves as a side story based on warriors from prior games on both console and PC returning from war) in favor of a straight action-adventure, it's absolutely mandatory that the game exhibits next-gen polish.

Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Blueside Inc.
Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios
Available	Winter 2007

Battlestar Galactica

Frackin' good diversion

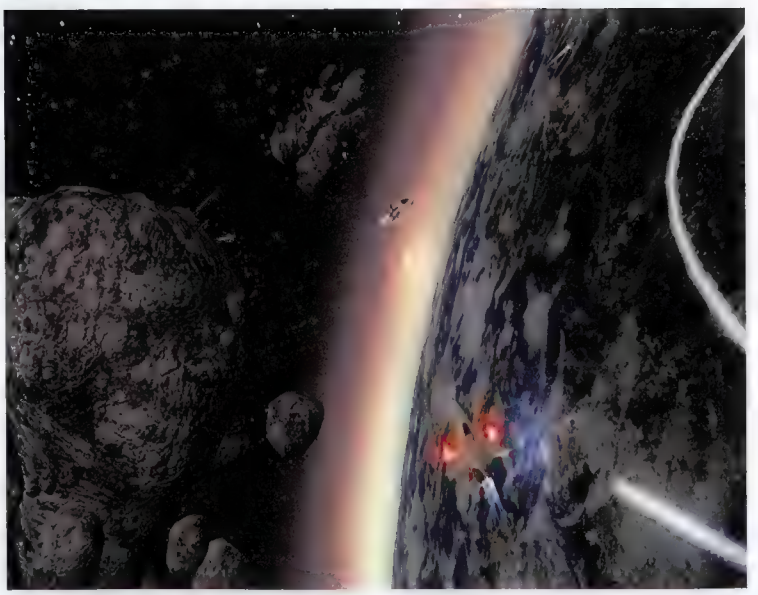
words Greg Orlando

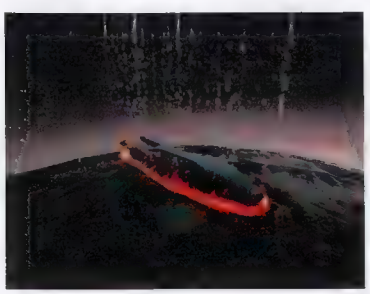
The war between the cybernetic devils and humans heats up on Xbox Live Arcade. The pesky Cylons have set upon humanity, and the latest battle is being fought by downloadable content.

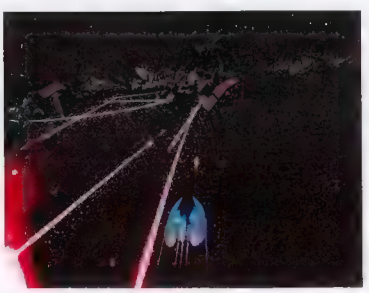
For 800 Xbox Live points (roughly $8), people can join the fight. The game allows for 8-player battles and features eight ships taken directly from the revived *Battlestar Galactica* series shown on the Sci-Fi Network. Players can take control of the human made Viper II or its sexier, faster version the Viper VII. Specialized ships such as the Blackbird allow for greater stealth (it comes with cloaking technology and a homing drone) or powerful attacks, as is the case with the slow-but-deadly Combat Raptor. Playing as the Cylons, players can access a basic Raider, as well as a Heavy, Speed, and Cloak version.

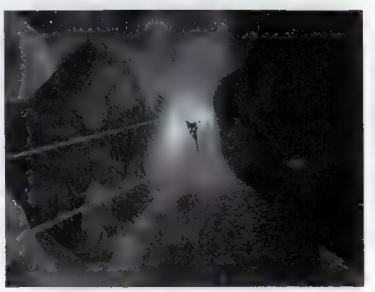
The game offers a single-player campaign, as well as three multiplayer modes in domination, deathmatch, and team deathmatch. Of the three, domination seems the most intriguing, with players needing to capture turrets on enemy ships to win.

Straightforward, balls-out space combat is offered with every jaunt into space, and players should have a wonderful time clearing hostiles out left and right. As they say, frackin' diverting entertainment.









Battlestar Galactica	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Auran
Publisher	Sierra
Available	October

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THE CLUB

words Casey Loe

In the absurdly shooter-packed marketplace of today, new franchises better have one hell of a hook if they hope to survive. The Club has chosen an interesting one, striving for a fast and light arcade style experience in place of a lengthy single-player quest. In each of its many bite-sized missions, your goal is not merely to survive, but to rack up enough combo kills to hit a target score.

The titular Club is one of those Smash-TV rich-person gladiator things, where in-debt gamblers and wanted criminals get paid to kill each other by the truckload in abandoned prisons and rented cruise liners. There is no Story Mode in The Club (at least, not at present); instead, you choose a character, an area, a game mode, and a difficulty level, and try to beat the score. The more missions you clear, the more missions you'll unlock—it looks like there's well over 50 of them.

The Club doesn't bother much with the slower aspects of shooters, like cover and sniping. Despite sharing a third-person perspective with the stop-and-pop shooter Gears of War, The Club is all pop and no stop. You earn combos by killing frequently (the more kills you rack up, the less time you get between them) and by killing stylishly (by making head shots, catching multiple targets in an explosion, scoring a kill with the last bullet in a clip, and so on). There are a few minor exploration elements—you can boost your combos by shooting the skull icons hidden in every stage, and pick up new weapons and health kits by exploring alleys and buildings off of the preset

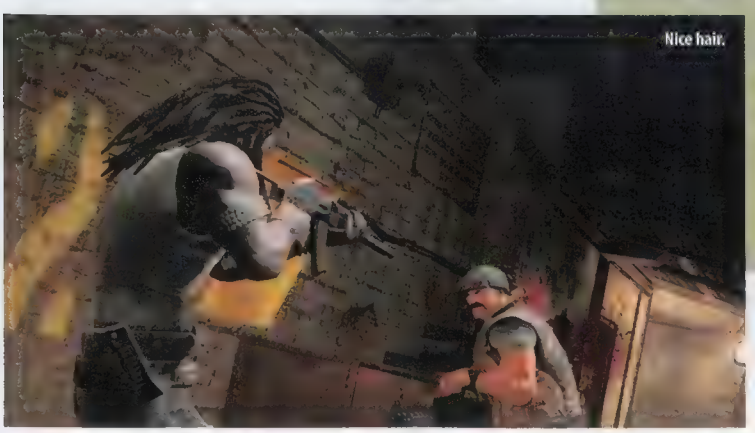
> "The Club is all pop and no stop."

course. And the game isn't all frantic racing, either; mission types like Siege force you to stay put and defend your turf as wave after wave of foes come to you.

The cast of eight selectable characters look like an interesting bunch, and seem to be heavily inspired by films like *Snatch* and *Smoking Aces*. But without much of a storyline, it remains to be seen if there's a reason to get attached to any of them beyond their statistical differences in the fields of Speed, Strength, and Stamina. The variety of characters should make things interesting for multiplayer, which offers four-player split-screen play as well as the usual online options.

The Club's unusual structure and quick pace set it apart from the rest of the shooter crowd... But will that be enough? With Unreal Tournament and Army of Two now joining Turok and Mercenaries 2 in The Club's early 2008 release window... I sorta doubt it.

The Club	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Bizarre Creations
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	Various modes
Available	Early 2008



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Too Human

The most misunderstood game in the industry?

words Brady Fiechter

Don't mess with a man and his sword.

"this weekend I'm really looking forward to, because I'm gonna sleep a lot." Persistently addled president of Silicon Knights Dennis Dyack is obviously relieved that his company's most ambitious project has finally been shown again after an 18 month hiatus. He's quick to point out that Too Human has gotten a bad rap since its shaky E3 debut in 2006, floundering in the internet circles as one of the "most misunderstood games in the industry."

Misunderstood or not, Silicon Knights has conviction, and it's good that they've stuck to their guns, because the game stands as an impassioned, intriguing proposition from the talent behind Legacy of Kain and Eternal Darkness. "I sent an email around to the company, and I was like... You can't tell how you guys are gonna react. You guys could come in and just really think, 'Pffff, this sucks dude.' If you guys would have said that, we would have been OK with it, because the email I sent around was that everyone's worked really hard, and this is what we wanted to create. And we created something at least for ourselves, one game that... If you create something for yourself you'll please one person. When you create entertainment, you just don't know. And we felt good about it, we were just like, you know, we like this, this is the game we'd like to play. Hopefully people will understand it for what it is."

Heavily influenced by Norse Mythology, Too Human is seriously story driven and bent on taking a deep plunge into role-playing waters. The hour I was allowed to explore revealed more of the beginning action qualities of the game, but Dyack points out that his vision is an open book that's barely been read. "You know, we've been compared to games like God of War, and Devil May Cry, and we certainly have some elements in that, but Too Human is not an action game with some light RPG elements. It is a pure fusion of both those genres. And as you can see, with the epic drops and epic sets of collecting and skill trees and runic charms and placing runes and the customization of your character—we have all the depth and robust RPG level of a game like Diablo 2, but at the same time we're incorporating action elements. And you look at the video of Too Human, and you don't see those skill trees and stuff, you think, Oh, this is supposed to be like a God of War, but

"And I think, really, people always want something this new, and when you give it to them, man is it misunderstood." - D. Dyack

Kill them for being so damned ugly.

'Cool,' but then I was like, 'Hey man, wait a minute, I can do 50 skeletons, I'd rather do 50 skeletons than this one Blood Gollum, or whatever. We have to balance all that in Too Human."

For the game's combat, Silicon Knights decided to assign melee attacks to the right analog stick, keeping chains and the more complex setups less about button presses and more about maintaining flow. There are quite a few ways to approach a group of attackers, and as more items are collected, the action promises a continual ramp of strategy.

"It's ironic, because as Silicon Knights, everyone wants us to do Eternal Darkness 2, and we're known for horror right now," says Dyack. "I really am paranoid, and I think everyone here is paranoid of being pigeonholed. So Too Human is nothing like those."

But it does hint at a continuing theme of bleakness and decay.

"It's funny, when I talk about Legacy of Kain or even Eternal Darkness, a lot of people think Eternal Darkness was very Lovecraft oriented—sort of influenced by

it's not like that at all. If you're to call it something like that, it's really a disservice to the game, and hopefully what we've shown today is that it's much more than that by you guys having a chance to play it with all the different weapons. It's just insane the amount of combinations you have... This is a combination like never before. And I think, really, people always want something this new, and when you give it to them, man is it misunderstood."

The basics: you begin the game as the cybernetic god Baldur, who will maintain a singular personality and story arc despite the specific character type chosen from the outset. Champion, Commander, Bersker, Bio Mechanic and Defender are up for grabs, distinguished by their hit points, melee and ballistic strengths, as well as armor and basic skillsets. The Champion, for example, is well balanced, relying on one-handed weapons and excelling at air combat.

"We're at a stage right now where the game is complete in content and stuff," says Dyack. "So we're balancing... When I played Diablo 2, I remember when I was like a level 10 Necromancer, when I saw the Blood Gollum, I was like,

Lovecraft, which was certainly true," says Dyack. "I'm a big Michael Moorecock fan, *Eternal Champion*. When I read the *Elric* series, and really even Legacy of Kain, you look at Elric, he's almost like a vampire. You look at some of those things—*Unforgiven* was one of my favorite movies of all time. Not a happy movie. It painted people—there was no good, there was no evil, there was gray. And I think you'll see that as a signature in all our products, it's just too simple to label people as evil or good. Because no one ever thinks they're evil, no one ever thinks they're good. Yeah, there is a bleakness, there is a darkness. I don't know what that is, except I can say I guess I'm attracted to that."

Too Human

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Silicon Knights
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	2008

Mercenaries 2 World in Flames

Flying the unfriendly skies. Better safe than sorry.

words Greg Orlando

Say goodbye to the dark and dreary warzone that is North Korea.

Say hello to the lush and vibrant warzone that is Venezuela.

Mercenaries has jumped continents and gotten a lot cheerier in the process. The third-person adventure game Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction allowed players to storm through a war-torn North Korea, as a gun for hire. Players got to experience a series of open-world environments while taking on various combat missions for various factions that included the North Koreans, Russians, and Americans.

It was good and, players noted, depressing. Technology limitations prevented a huge draw distance, so North Korea seemed perpetually bathed in fog.

For the game's sequel, things are getting bigger, brighter, and badder. Players can again take on the role of one of three mercenaries, but this time will be doing it in an open world that spans a host of different environments—sun-kissed ones with fairly big draw distances.

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames again embraces the notion that if players can see it, they can steal it, use it, or blow it up. Early gameplay films for World in Flames have shown the female mercenary Jennifer Mui vaulting on top of a tank's cannon, running across the length of it to the cockpit hatch, opening the hatch, tossing in a grenade, and then hopping into the tank itself to pilot it. It's also possible, say, to use American Christopher Jacobs to fire a grappling gun at a helicopter, be propelled upward, assault its pilot and toss him out of the cockpit, and then fly the craft. Developer Pandemic has even stated players will be able to commandeer a huge missile gunboat to wreak vast amounts of destruction.

New to the game is the notion that players can form their own mercenary army. Here, it will be possible, say, to recruit a helicopter pilot to the fold. Doing so gives the player access to special units and abilities: when he spots supplies in the game world, he can mark them and have his pilot recover them. Players can then access the resources (weapons, oil, etc.) without having to either fight for them or pay.

Resources can also be acquired by performing missions for in-game factions. This time around, factions include the Venezuelan rebels, a faux-United Nations, an oil company, and a pirate group. If players align themselves with one of these organizations, they'll be given access to information and, potentially, weaponry. They'll also run the risk of offending other factions and drawing their ire, but World in Flames is forgiving enough to allow mercenaries to do jobs for hostile factions and win their trust.

Although no playable version for World in Flames has emerged thus far, Pandemic has shown off some of the game's more intriguing scenarios. In one, the gunslinger Matthias Nilsson used a motorboat to travel to a huge offshore oil well. Once on the well, he engaged in a fierce gunfight and, having rid it of enemies, began to destroy the structure. Using missiles and rockets, he got the well to topple and sink into the sea, riding off to safety in the motorboat as it all burned. In another sequence, Nilsson called in an air strike that unleashed a MOAB (Mother

of all Bombs or Massive Ordinance Air Blast) bomb on a downtown area. As the explosion took out everything in a considerable radius, Nilsson had to race to escape the rapidly expanding blast. In a third piece of footage, a helicopter with a grappling hook was able to lift a semi-trailer truck off the ground and hover with it. In a decidedly neat touch, the player then decided to drop the truck, but destroy it with missiles before it hit the ground.

A brand-new two-player cooperative mode allows for double the explosions, and in-game characters will no longer be killed when they enter water (hooray for swimming lessons). And, of course, in keeping with the game's subtitle, fire will play an enormous role in the proceedings. Players can ignite just about any object in the game world, using it to lure enemies out into the open, or just as a sheer destructive force.

Sadly, the game has been delayed, but Pandemic promises a release in early 2008. The reason for the delay, according to the company, is to allow the developers to polish the title. "We're sitting on a great game here," a Pandemic employee explained in a recent video developer's diary for World in Flames.

I could've used him on the 405 the other day...

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS2, PS3, PC
Developer	Pandemic
Publisher	Electronic Arts
Online/Multi	2 player co-op
Available	2008

Beowulf

Epic poem now 100 percent less educational

words Greg Orlando

Those inclined to study Beowulf as a piece of literature will find themes of brotherhood, fate, and familial tradition. The epic poem, which scholars date to roughly 700-1010 AD, relates the story of the Germanic hero Beowulf as he battles three monsters and secures glory for himself.

Those inclined to play Beowulf will discover it is possible to rip off a bony spike from a sea serpent's body and jab it into its gigantic eye. Or that it's not only morale boosting to, say, grab a foe and violently break off one of its arms and beat him gratuitously gory and moderately violent.

It need not be said, but Ubisoft's Beowulf is violent and blood-soaked. The third-person brawler does not shy away from the more unseemly aspects of combat and will see release with an "M" rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). This comes in stark contrast to the PG-13 movie Beowulf now out in theaters.

With the license to [illegible] themed title and expand [illegible] ideas in the poem and the [illegible] movie, Ubisoft has made some interesting [illegible] ability he [illegible] of monsters by his [illegible] he'll be accompanied [illegible] grow in strength with each [illegible] who can be used to perform [illegible] in-game tasks. And the main character himself will have some unique ways of interacting with his team of thanes.

First and foremost, the epic figure Beowulf is moved by heroism and, ultimately, fueled by rage. As Beowulf [illegible] sweeping combinations or pulls [illegible] successful defensive maneuvers such

"The epic figure Beowulf is moved by heroism and, ultimately, fueled by rage..."

as blocks or rolls, he'll begin to glow with a blue hue. This blue light means Beowulf's heroism has increased, which inspires his allies to fight with renewed vigor. In addition, Beowulf's health actually increases with sustained heroic activity, making him more able to sustain damage in battle. In perilous situations, the hero can also tap into his rage, unleashing a carnal fury—with a price.

The carnal fury, once powered up by holding down the Xbox 360's left trigger, sends Beowulf into a possessed state. Here, he'll become invulnerable and will be able to perform feats of great strength: In one of the game's opening sequences, a rage-powered Beowulf actually lifts the head of a giant sea serpent in order to punch it in its eye, and then leap onto the beast to rip off one of the spikes on its body. This fury has its downside, however, as it leaves Beowulf vulnerable and places his allies in danger. "Use it, and pay the price," the game says about this particular mode.

A playtest of a near-finished version showed off some neat elements and well-designed stages. At one point, Beowulf had to storm upward past a series of stone stairways, battling albino humanoid creatures amid a blood-red and cloudy background. Once Beowulf finished scaling the steps, he entered into a fairly large open-area dungeon. Here, his thanes were under assault by lots of the aforementioned albino creatures.

The objective of this stage is fairly obvious: huge stones must be moved into place, blocking entrances and preventing more monsters from pouring forth. Beowulf must command his forces to push the object by looking at it and issuing an appropriate command. From there, the thanes will begin to push the object with all their collective might. Their leader can aid them by playing a rhythm-based minigame, ensuring their work will go more quickly, or simply leave them to their shoving and focus on killing monsters.

Sadly, the preview build did not include what likely will be the game's high points—its cataclysmic battles against the three monsters outlined in the epic poem. It is expected Beowulf will square off against the demon Grendel, Grendel's mother (who is played in the film version by Angelina Jolie), and the dragon that eventually kills our hero. There's no word as to how these battles play out, or if the game will be faithful to the events in the poem (Beowulf kills Grendel after ripping his arm and beheads its mother, etc.), but the hope is that they will be more than worth the price of admission.

And so, to those who suggest that poetry is a useless venture, it can only be suggested that they are addle-brained poopheads. Beowulf is literature worth playing.

Beowulf

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC, PSP
Developer	Ubisoft
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	None
Available	Now

Bionic Commando

words Brady Fiechter

No sensible modern human being believes that good things really do come to those who wait, but self-described Capcom fanboy Ben Judd—"over 50 percent of my shirts still have the Capcom logo on them"—begs do differ. Judd, in an unusual role as an American producer working in Japan's Osaka office, is spearheading the sequel to Bionic Commando—two decades after the original was released on the NES. Apparently, BC didn't go over so well in Japan, but with Judd's persistence and Capcom's growing focus to please the American pallet, a sequel is on the way, developed by Swedish house GRIN and guided by several internal Capcom directors.

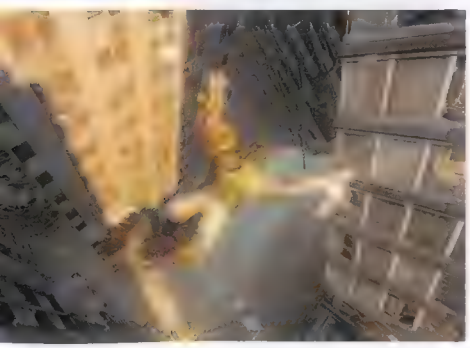
"A lot of people are happy that the title is finally coming back," said Judd as he led a brief demo of the new Bionic Commando swinging through some post-apocalyptic cityscape. "But there are, of course, a fair amount of people that are saying this isn't

What's the big deal? looks just like NES.

Aim, fire, swing: A twisted metropolis beckons...

the Bionic Commando I remember. It's an 8-bit game, and any time you try and translate a 2D game from 20 years ago... there are so many different directions you can take it in that you're going to invariably ruin someone's nostalgia and childhood. But it's important for everybody to know that I played this game as a child, it's one of the best memories I have as a kid. More important than trying to further my career or anything is making a good game that people are going to play and enjoy."

To begin forging that game fans and newcomers would indeed meet with approval, one of the first decisions was to settle on the design of the lead character, whose name has been summarily changed from the original Rad Spencer to Nathan Spencer. (For all you superfreaks, Super Joe's still Super Joe, short for Supervisor Joseph Bishop.) Initially the team came up with an intimidating character with black hair who "kind of looked like a large gorilla. We actually were gonna go with that, because we ran different focus tests, and people said, Yeah, we like gorillas. big guys are tough and they're cool," explained Judd. Well, we all know the best characters are often tough and cool, but Capcom pulled back last second, realizing that this latest Spencer wasn't right. So they settled on a character who, they believe, reflects the sensibilities of the classic.



"After we announced the game we received a lot of flack for the dreadlocks of the character. We knew when we put it in the game a lot of people wouldn't appreciate why we wanted it in there," said Judd. "Bionic commando is a game about motion, about the sort of flow and animation you have [moving] through this 3D space. So we needed something that would move in the air as he was swinging. Solid Snake has the bandana, Ninja Gaiden has the scarf. So we decided to go with hair. Rather than giving him the long, red Irish or Sweedish Fabio hair, we decided to go with shorter dreads."

"But it's important for everybody to know that I played this game as a child, it's one of the best memories I have as a kid." - Producer Ben Judd

Getting the swing mechanic right took a lot of time and planning according to Judd, who emphasized that your freedom to latch onto pretty much anything you see is the foundation to the gameplay. Instead of fixed points, a slight auto-assist along the vertical axis guides the line from the 90-lb mechanical arm into rocks, signs, overpasses, you name it. In combat, you'll face robots, humans, robot-human and other various terroristic cronies, so expect action aplenty. Judd pointed out that "Nathan's pretty damned good at blowing things up."

Bionic Commando — Preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Capcom/GRIN
Publisher	Capcom
Available	2008

SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

Simply smashing...

words Greg Orlando

The cardboard box and the grizzled soldier hiding underneath it may seem out of place in a Nintendo game, but no more so than the grinning blue hedgehog. With Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Nintendo has really moved the moon. It is only one of two games to ever feature a competitor's characters in one of its games. It is the only game to feature two characters from two different competitors.

This year's iteration of Smash Bros. includes Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog, and Konami's Solid Snake. According to the lore, game developer Hideo Kojima fairly begged Nintendo to get Snake into Super Smash Bros. Melee for the Nintendo GameCube, but there simply wasn't time to get him incorporated into the mix. As for Sonic, well, the popular Sega character was a natural for inclusion, especially since he had teamed up with Nintendo's Mario for Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games.

Brawl inserts other new fighters into the mix. Mario's evil doppelganger Wario appears for the first time in the combat-laden series and, not surprisingly, Nintendo has hinted that his power is tied into not only his squat, muscular physique, but rather flatulence. The angelic Pit from the Kid Icarus series has been added, and will

"Brawl is, visually, an explosion at the fireworks factory..."

Bowser is not pleased.

be able to use his wings to fly for short distances and his bow to dish out an appropriate amount of pain. Kirby co-star Metaknight also appears here, wielding a mean sword. Rounding out the package are the Pokémon Trainer, Ike from Fire Emblem, Lucas from Mother 3, Diddy of the famous Kong family, and Zero Suit Samus from Metroid.

Nintendo's Wii has won its audience—and a great deal of popularity—on the strength of its motion-sensitive controls. Yet Smash Bros. Brawl does not utilize the motion sensitive controls at all. Players can either play the game with the Wii remote held horizontally or else with the GameCube or Wii classic controller. The game's director Masahiro Sakurai has stated, "We found that trying to implement too much motion-sensory functionality can get in the way of the game. We're looking at keeping the control simple, as it has been."

Recently, Nintendo showed off a copy of the game at a San Francisco event for members of the press and simultaneously broke fans' hearts: Super Smash Bros. Brawl was delayed until February.

Simple it is. Using the Wii remote, the game utilizes the 1 and 2 buttons for basic and special attacks, respectively. Jump is accomplished by pushing up on the D-pad. Shields are activated with the B trigger. It takes virtually no time to learn the controls and, in terms of gameplay, button-mashing works surprisingly well.

Brawl is, visually, an explosion at the fireworks factory. The game loves to fill the screen with explosions, speed lines, flashes of color, and convulsive lighting effects. At times, and especially when four characters are on screen whaling the tar out of one another, the game becomes like an epileptic's waking dream—not to mention genuinely hard to follow in terms of who's doing what and to whom. Just when the thought occurs that it might not be possible to put more junk on the screen, BAM! Nintendo puts more junk on the screen. At times, it will even do its mischievous best to make the game more hard-to-follow by, say, including the odd powerup that unleashes a Nintendogs horde. When a cute puppy puts its paws up against the front of the game screen, players won't be able to see any of the action.

Sadly, Solid Snake wasn't playable at the event. This was a genuine shame, as it's uncertain how Nintendo will be able to incorporate this more somber and realistic character into the very cartoonish gameplay. Not much is known about Snake's arsenal, either; guns in a Smash Bros. title would seem out of place. Nintendo has, however, hinted that Snake's cardboard box will be usable as a weapon.

Sonic, however, was included in the game, and it was nice to see him doing well fighting amid some of the game's ever-changing themed stages. Sonic seemed a natural fit in stages such as the Pokémon arena, performing his dash attacks and turning into Super Sonic after smashing a powerup.

At its heart, Brawl is meaty fun. It's all bang and blur, powerups and crazy attacks. Players will enjoy the referential humor (Mario can now use the water blaster from Super Mario Sunshine), and the sheer manic glee the game vomits forth at every second. When the multiplayer mode with friends goes sour, players will be able to fight against strangers online. When that gets old, the game will also feature a single-player adventure titled The Subspace Emissary that pits a player's chosen team of characters against some classic Nintendo foes as well as brand-new enemies from the mysterious Subspace Army.

The smashing will commence in February.

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Nintendo
Publisher	Nintendo
Available	February 10, 2008

play
Staff Round up

Reviews

December 2007

Dave Halverson

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

The play rating system

10. Perfect
9. Extraordinary
8. Great
7. Good
6. Decent
5. Average
4. Below average
3. Poor
2. Bad
1. Terrible

Nick Des Barres

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

THE WITCHER

IGN BEST OF E3 2007 WINNER

GAMESPOT E3'07 EDITORS' CHOICE FINALIST

There is no good, no evil – only decisions and consequences

Action-heavy, real-time combat system with advanced motion-captured swordplay

Over 250 game-changing skills and abilities including advanced alchemy, multiple fighting styles and powerful magics

Mature fantasy storyline with over 80 hours of non-linear roleplaying

MATURE 17+
M
Blood and Gore
Partial Nudity
Strong Language
Strong Sexual Content
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE

Fortune and glory, Naughty Dog style

words Dave Halverson

Oftentimes, the environment will do the talking.

It's taken nearly a year for Naughty Dog's first game to emerge on the PS3—short order for a game of this magnitude. Part of Sony's elite first-party contingent—the most influential in all the land—Naughty Dog broke altogether new ground on PlayStation with Crash Bandicoot and PS2 with the Jak & Daxter series, but could they three-peat with a game that bears no resemblance to their creature-based juggernauts? An adventure grounded in duck 'n' cover and environmental acrobatics? …Oh yeah. I consider Naughty Dog among the top five developers in the world, but even I had my doubts on this one. From the flamboyant Jak to a guy in a T-shirt… How do you build a franchise around a guy in a T-shirt?

Ten minutes into Uncharted, as I sat guzzling a Venti Iced Coffee to wash the shoe taste out of my mouth, it hit me: not only is Nathan Drake likeable, he's goddamn Indiana Jones…hell, he's better. As you sift through the many reviews on Uncharted, comparisons to Indiana Jones and Tomb Raider are inevitable. Nathan performs the same type of nimble acrobatics and even pushes a block or two in an adventure that would make Harrison Ford wish he was CGI; but be weary. This is no Indiana Jones or Tomb Raider; this is something entirely original. It inevitably contains elements of both series, but we're in entirely new territory here. Uncharted is more than just a game. It's an interactive blockbuster that requires you and a controller to move from scene to scene. The Tomb Raider-esque bits, while done to perfection, do not define the game, nor do the treasure hunting or environmental puzzle aspects. The gameplay is driven by the terrain and story, plain and simple. Aside from the usual visual prompts Uncharted is as organic a gaming experience as you will ever encounter. It's also the single most breathtaking game ever created. Anyone who tells you that great graphics don't make a game owns a Wii. While great gameplay is just as important, that gameplay doesn't have to be 100% original to stir the soul. You want original; go play LocoRoco (also available from SCEA!). Uncharted does many things, many of which have been done before and a few that haven't. It's

the way in which they are presented here that makes them altogether oven fresh. The duck 'n' cover aspects surpass Gears of War's (I know it sounds impossible, but it's true); the adventure surpasses any of Lara's previous outings (ditto) and the environmental puzzles eclipse all that came before them. Why? Because technology drives gameplay. Naughty Dog use the PS3 to reinvigorate the adventure gaming experience, combining key elements that every gamer holds dear in a game that looks and feels like a blockbuster film. Just as Heavenly Sword redefined the hack 'n' slash, Uncharted redefines adventure. These recent PS3 offerings have brought about a total system reset in regards to how I view video games. After 17 years of 365-days-a-year gaming and five major hardware transitions, the jump from PS2 to PS3 has proven the most redefining, almost entirely due to technology (when it's in the right hands). What makes Uncharted so very special is what most people don't notice as they rip through the game to post their time on "the boards." I say most because there are those who do drink it all in—who play a game as if they were living it. They all read Play. This is why I loathe a game with characters that don't walk. I play my games as if I was living vicariously through the protagonist, soaking in detail, admiring panoramas, and inspecting every nook of a given area. Naughty Dog makes games the way I like to play them. Nathan and his cohorts move and react within the world with utter perfection. Their cadence changes in water, on slopes, and running up stairs, and their posture conforms to every inch of the game. Prop Nathan up on a crate and his stance will change as he approaches the edge rather than the usual floating foot stance; in-game dialogue scenes feature painstakingly animated facial features, and emerging from the water characters appear soaking wet for a realistic period of time. There's a point early on in the game investigating a German U-boat where Nathan emerges from behind a Waterfall gazing upon the vast jungle. As the birds caw and flutter over the horizon it gives you a sense of the epic scale of the game, but it's only a taste of what's to come. Coming up out of the bunker into chapter 20 is when it really hit me: my God, video games have arrived—I'm witnessing a rebirth. The terrain itself in Uncharted is as detailed and interactive as the characters. The levels in Uncharted *are* the gameplay. Ledges that appear dry and decayed crumble as if real, stone and mortar harborage can be slowly pecked away by enemy fire, and accessibility is always a product of surveying the terrain. When you find yourself unable to proceed, ND doesn't mark your way. You can press a button to point you in the general direction (but don't) or just do what you'd do in real life and use your head—survey the area and find a way. Like a film, the pacing in Uncharted is its greatest asset, only where a film director need only worry about the script and visual Naughty Dog must contend with the added element of interaction. Too much of any given element makes Nathan a dull boy, and so they've orchestrated things with a focus on diversity weaving their way between gunplay, platforming, puzzle solving, exploration, and driving. The Jeep and Waverunner sequences are too just too damn cool by the way. Again, tried-and-true gameplay made all the better by strides in technology.

The special effects hit strong and often.

> "Naughty Dog use the PS3 to reinvigorate the adventure gaming experience, combining key elements that every gamer holds dear..."

There will be absolutely no complaining about Uncharted's length either. The core game is in the 10-hour range but replayability is off the charts. Achievements in the game allow you to unlock a myriad of new characters to play through with, including the game's scrappy female Elena, those early E3 versions of Nathan and a few others I won't spoil here. Speaking of spoilers...I pray the game's story and big twist remain a mystery until you experience Uncharted for yourself. Like all great films (and this game is a great film—the acting is first rate) there are some killer twists in store. If you like Indiana Jones, Tomb Raider, Ico, and Gears of War, Uncharted will be your game of the year, I'm absolutely sure of it. Wait: did I just compare it to... Awh hell.

Fortune score 10

\+ Heretofore unseen level of detail, visual splendor and in-game cinematics, in a game that never lets go.

– -Anyone who uses the phrase "Dude Raider" to describe it.

System(s)	PS3
Developer	Naughty Dog
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	Nov. 20

UNCHARTED: THE DEFINITIVE INTERVIEW

[Evan Wells, *Co-President*
[Amy Hennig, *Game Director*
[Josh Scherr, *Lead Cinematic Animator*
[Jeremy Yates, *Lead Gameplay Animator*
[Travis McIntosh, *Lead Programmer*
[Neil Druckmann, *Game Designer*
[Richard Lemarchand, *Lead Game Designer*
[Bruce Straley, *Co-Art Director*

"We'd rewrite dialogue, and even sometimes radically change whole scenes, based on ideas we came up with right there on the set."

Amy Hennig

Uncharted is obviously a huge departure for Naughty Dog. Is this a direction you could have gone in the past, or has it become possible as the studio has evolved?

[Evan Wells, *Co-President*] When we sat down to decide the direction we wanted to take with our first PlayStation 3 game, we knew that we wanted to do something different. Not only different for Naughty Dog, but also different from the other games that we saw being developed for next-generation platforms. We could have done another Jak and Daxter game, which certainly would have been the easier route, but we wanted to do something that would really push the technology in the PS3 and force us to dive head first into the deep end of "next-gen" game development. This choice definitely helped our studio evolve as we tackled problems that were new to us. But that's what keeps people excited around here, and we hope that excitement is evident in the game that we've made.

At what point did you get together as a team and decide you wanted to make a realistic next-generation adventure game? Were there any doubts/back and forth about what your first next-gen title should be?

[Evan] Going with something more realistic than our games in the past was a choice that we made very early on. We knew that the PlayStation 3 was going to finally provide enough horsepower that we could take on a human character in a modern-day setting and present it with enough believability to immerse the player in the experience we were creating. However, we most definitely had our doubts and hurdles to overcome along the way. It meant that we had to incorporate motion capture into our animation pipeline, work tirelessly to make sure our characters didn't fall into the uncanny valley, and discover the signature look that we wanted our stylized reality to have.

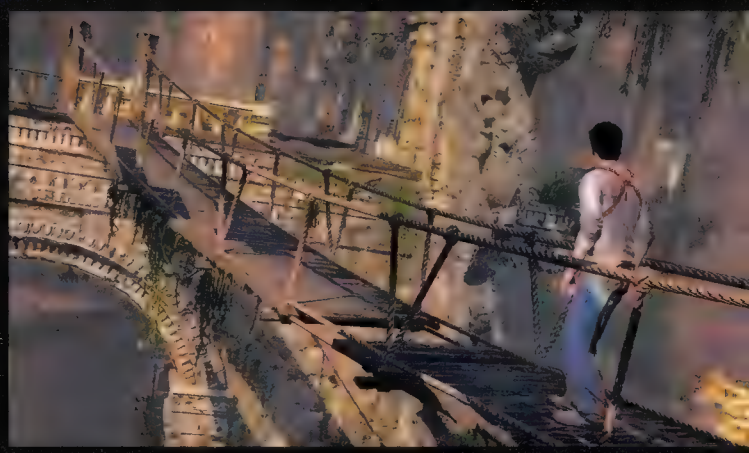
Uncharted manages to emulate so many great play styles yet avoids being cliché or repetitive. Was there a driving force behind the story and game flow, or was it a collaborative effort?

[Amy Hennig, *Game Director*] Like everything else at Naughty Dog, the story

and script development was a collaborative process. Josh, Neil and I spearheaded the writing effort and worked together on the scripts, and then we'd continue to refine the staging and dialogue even more in rehearsal with our actors and mocap director.
This was one of the coolest things about our process. Because the actors performed together on the mocap stage, and because the dialogue and staging had to be memorized, we devoted a lot of time to rehearsal—and it was in the rehearsal process that we really got to polish the scenes. We'd rewrite dialogue, and even sometimes radically change whole scenes, based on ideas we came up with right there on the set.

Without a great script a story this integral can hurt a game, especially one so prone to comparison. It's a fine line between overly snarky and overly dull when you're playing the treasure-hunting game, yet (in my opinion) you've nailed it as well as it's ever been done, if not better. How difficult a process was this? Did it evolve alongside the game or was it written beforehand?

[Amy] Well, we initially created a lengthy story treatment document, which gave us a road map for the project and an outline for all the dialogue and cutscenes. But we wrote the actual scripts as we went along, in parallel with the rest of the game development. I don't think you can do it any other way—too many things shift and change over the course of development, and your story has to be flexible enough to adapt.
Not only that, but you get to know your characters better as you go along—and as you become more familiar with the cadences and rhythms of your actors' speech, you get better at writing for *them*, specifically. In a way, writing for Uncharted was more like writing for a TV show (rather than a film), because we worked continuously on it over the course of a year, shooting in almost episodic installments. It's one of the benefits of being located here in LA: since the mocap and voice studios are just down the road, we can pick away at our shoot schedule and learn as we go, rather than having to travel here and record everything in one fell swoop. It also allows us to develop an ongoing working relationship with our cast, and gives them time to develop their characters the way an actor on a TV series does. Over the course of the project, the actors really settled into their characters and contributed more and more to the writing process.
I think all of these things helped us hit the right tone in the dialogue. We got a lot of input, rigorously revised the scripts, and rehearsed the hell out of the scenes, always trying to make sure we hit that sweet spot between overly-serious and too-jokey. In the end, we wanted the characters to come off as authentic, believable people, not caricatures.

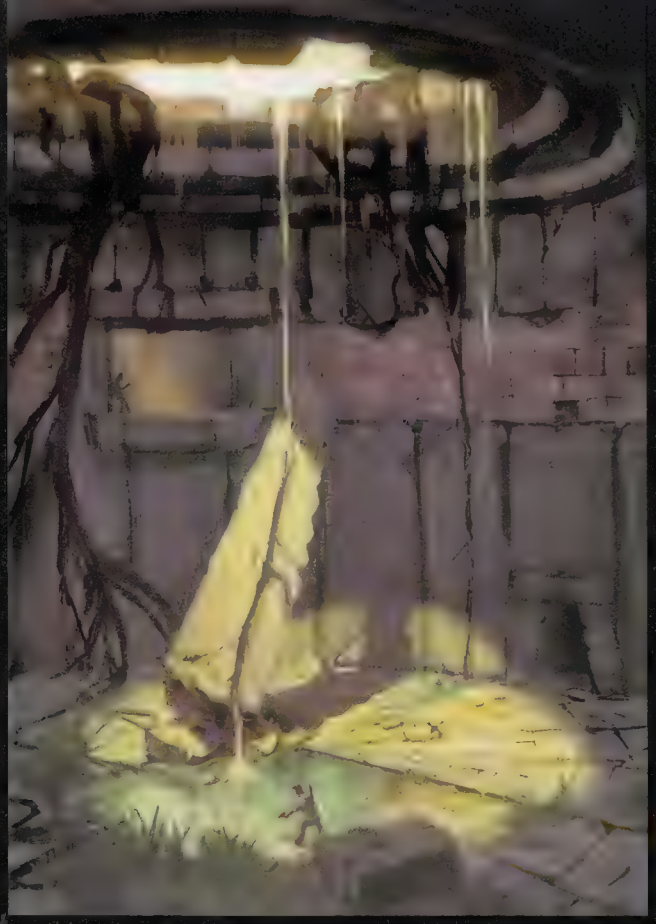


What about casting? How long and arduous a process was it to find just the right actors?

[Amy] The first hurdle was just realizing we had to cast this differently than we were used to. Normally in video games you're only casting for the voice; an actor's

"We knew that the PlayStation 3 was going to finally provide enough horsepower that we could take on a human character in a modern-day setting"

Evan Wells



physical appearance is irrelevant. But this was much more like casting for an on-camera role, because we were looking for actors to provide both the mocap and voice performances.

This is actually more unusual in games than you'd think. A lot of developers hire voice actors to record the dialogue, then hire mocap performers to pantomime to the pre-recorded tracks. Or they record all the mocap, then hire voice actors to dub over the physical performance. But we wanted the same actors to play the characters throughout, so we not only had to find great voice actors, they needed to be the right physical type, have lots of on-camera and stage experience, and be willing and eager to do motion-capture. That narrowed the field quite a bit!

Once we knew what we were looking for, though, the casting process went remarkably smoothly. We were incredibly fortunate to find our cast after just a couple of audition sessions.

Another key ingredient in storytelling with next-gen is of course facial animation and body language, which you deliver seamlessly in-game. Nine times out of 10, even on 360 and PS3, the more designers try to emulate real people the more imitation they appear.

[Josh Scherr, *Lead Cinematic Animator*] Rather than striving for absolute realism in the animation, our goal was believable, natural-looking motion, and I think that's the key to our success. Drake looks like a real guy, but if he jumped across huge chasms, swung from vines, and climbed up walls in a truly "realistic" way, it wouldn't be nearly as dynamic or cool. You start with what's natural and you amplify it, you exaggerate it, you push it just enough so that it's still believable, but not so much that it looks like a cartoon. It was a difficult balance to maintain. For the cutscenes, we started with motion capture to obtain the subtleties of human motion, but combined it with keyframed animation to push it out of the "uncanny valley." The best of both worlds.

How difficult a process is it getting facial animation to look natural in game?

[Josh] This was one of the biggest challenges faced (ha!) by the animation team. Since it was such an important part of the characterization in Uncharted, we chose to do all the facial animation by hand rather than using facial capture; this gave us total control over the performance. We went through multiple iterations of our facial animation system over a period of several months before we arrived at the rig we used for Uncharted. Eric Baldwin, our facial animation lead, did numerous test animations to determine the best approach for each character. Ultimately, we combined specific aspects of a realistic face—eyelids deforming when the eyeballs moved underneath, wrinkles when the eyebrows are raised, the lips parting as the mouth opens, etc.—with just enough stylization to avoid the dead-eyed, mask-like look that you see with a lot of "realistic" facial animation. The video footage we shot on the mocap stage was also very useful for reference and inspiration.

Is the animation all motion capture or is it a mix of motion cap and hand animation? I've never seen such realistic movement, especially in duck and cover situations.

[Jeremy Yates, *Lead Gameplay Animator*] The double-edged sword of realistic animation is when actually done well, people assume it must be motion capture. All of Drake's traversal and gunplay are animated by hand, whereas his melee combat is created using a motion-capture base. The ingredients for Drake's overlapping actions involve very careful weaving of layered animations to produce his final look and feel. These animations require a level of control and precision that would have been cumbersome to create on a motion-capture stage. When motion capture was used, we took special care to make sure it has a similar look to the animations done by hand in order to seamlessly blend them together.

Once you've got your motion capture, isn't the real trick plugging it into the set pieces? You manage to deliver the most natural collision/physics I've seen to date, avoiding the rubbery state of

"ragdoll" kills and cadavers that jiggle like they've been de-boned. Nathan can even stand on them with one leg propped up and it's all perfectly solid… Love the way water kills float to the surface too. How did you create an engine this efficient in such a short time frame?
[Travis McIntosh, *Lead Programmer*] A lot of what you are describing we got from writing our physics system in house, which gave us an enormous amount of freedom when it came to features such as ragdoll physics, buoyancy physics, etc. Another big component was the ability to do a lot of collision detection on the renderable geometry as opposed to some approximate collision surface (although we did this as well when appropriate). For instance, the leg IK runs on the actual visible geometry, as well as bullet impacts, and aiming. There was really no other way to get the perfect collisions we felt we really needed to sell the character interactions, and the only reason we were able to get any of that done was because we have so many programmers with expertise writing for the Cell, and the fact that there is such huge untapped potential in the Cell's SPU processors.

I'm obsessed with dynamic collision. When a character's movements do not correspond to his or her environment it pulls me out of the experience. The way that Nathan ascends and descends stairs, changes his body language running up hills, balances on edges (rather than taking a flat stance with a leg floating in mid air) and meshes with the terrain is probably the best it's ever been done. Maybe three or four teams have figured this out, and you've now taken it to a new level. Can you elaborate on why something that seems so simple is so rarely utilized? Is it rocket science?
[Travis] It's not often done, I think, because it's a very hard problem. Or rather, it's a very large number of small, somewhat difficult problems that must be solved simultaneously. Each jump, grab, stair animation, land and roll represents a week or two of work from a very talented programmer working with a very talented animator. We didn't try to solve any of these problems generally, or with a brilliant IK solution. We simply invested the time and hard work on each and every movement, and we did each one a dozen times until we got what we liked.
I think our real advantage, when it comes to in-game animation, is how closely and how well our programmers work with animators. We strongly believe in cutting out the middle man. So every time there is an in-game mechanic to implement, we simply get one animator and one programmer to sit down together and solve the problem using a few very simple techniques. And then we play it to see if it feels right. And if it doesn't, we do it again.

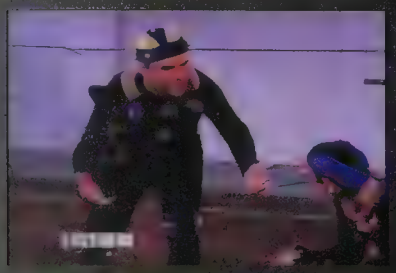
The gameplay—although evocative of many genres—switches gears throughout the adventure, much of which, like everything else in the game, is new to ND. Who choreographed and fine tuned all of this amazing duck and cover? It's Gears of War/Halo 3-good or better. But you're Naughty Dog… Did you recruit some mad specialist or just adapt?
[Neil Druckmann, *Game Designer*] Ha ha… no mad specialist here: it all basically came down to hard work and plenty of iterations to get our gunplay to its final state. We spent months and months fine-tuning everything from the cover transition distances and the sensitivity of the aiming to the accuracy of blindfire, and so on.

> "The double-edged sword of realistic animation is when actually done well, people assume it must be motion capture."
>
> Jeremy Yates

Whenever we changed anything with our gunplay, we would then spend several days testing our combat setups to make sure that we were headed in the right direction.
It's awesome to be listed next to the two heavy-hitters you mentioned in your question. They are two of the many shooters that we studied (read: played for lots of hours) as we were making Uncharted: Drake's Fortune—but being as good as some of the games we love wasn't enough for us. If you look at the top-gun games, you see a pattern where they each took the existing formula for the genre and evolved it in some way. We felt that we could do the same with our traversal mechanics.
We wanted to give the player the ability to quickly and easily maneuver during combat by using all of the traversal mechanics that they were learning during the platforming sections of the game. If there's a wall in front of you, you don't have to run around it. You can climb it or hang over the top edge to shoot your enemies—essentially creating new cover. This concept of "Traversal Gunplay" opens up the player's options during combat.

Thankfully the Guerillas in Uncharted are well funded, because I really love that they choose Waverunners over crappy boats. Going up river while taking out snipers is just awesome and your Jeep chase, where the targets come from every angle…too cool. Did you consider going heavier on vehicles at any point? What's here is so well done.
[Neil] It's always a tough balancing act, deciding whether to focus your resources on a few core mechanics or branch out and create fun through variety in gameplay. Since Uncharted is a new franchise, on a new console, with a focus on a new genre for us, we didn't want to spread ourselves thin by putting too much time into secondary mechanics. Now having said that, it just isn't a Naughty Dog game without some of our signature vehicle moments – and every classic action-adventure story has a few ballistic chases! Our Jeep Chase mission is all about high-speed spectacle. Elena is doing the driving and the player is controlling Drake as he unloads hails of bullets and lobs grenades from a rear-facing turret. As enemies approach on ATVs and trucks, the physics-based explosions, collapsing trees, and rich vistas all combine to give the player the experience of a death-defying ride through the jungle.
The Waverunner segment was the more difficult of the two to get right. We spent a lot of time on the vehicle's handling and on the physics of the dynamic water. One of the challenges was deciding whether to let Elena be completely AI driven or to allow the player to manually aim with her. At the end we decided it was much more fun to let the player do the driving as well as the shooting. Like you've mentioned, the up-river battle really shows off these mechanics on top of our awesome-looking water.
The vehicle segments are pretty close in scope to what we initially planned for them. We wanted these sequences to be just long enough that players were left wanting more. We're stoked to get such positive responses for them!

The game has been referred to as "Dude Raider," although I found it quite a departure. There are certainly similarities but you put your stamp on Uncharted just as Crystal has on Tomb Raider. Does the comparison ruffle your feathers?
[Richard Lemarchand, *Lead Game Designer*] We've always been more tickled than ruffled by the "Dude Raider" tag; we think it's very funny! We're also big fans of the Tomb Raider games, so any kind of comparison is very flattering.
The roots of Uncharted are pretty distinct from those of any other video game, though, and I'm pleased that you found the game to be a departure; we deliberately set out to create something very different. One of our main design goals was to reinvent the epic action-adventure style of storytelling, and to make something very contemporary while paying homage to the classics.
We did a ton of research into early adventure movies and pulp fiction, and thought very carefully about what appeals to modern audiences (like ourselves!). Our game's set in a stylized version of the real



MOTION CAPTURE

Uncharted utilizes a blend of motion capture and hand animation, although you would be hard pressed to tell which is which. In scenes such as the one here (shown in-game below) motion capture really makes the difference but only because of the spectacular character models and lighting that make the game's cinemas spring to vivid life.

world, and that brought its own unique challenges and rewards, too. We're excited to have branched out in a new direction, and we can't wait to see the response that we get from PlayStation 3 gamers.

And of course, you went with a guy…a guy whom I never dreamt I'd end up liking. In fact I was convinced that no matter how good Uncharted was that Nathan would keep it from greatness. He's easily the most bare bones hero ever. Within about 20 minutes, I felt like he was the next Indiana Jones. He clicked with me almost instantly. What was the genesis of this character (who looks nothing like Jason BTW)?
[Richard] We've always worked very hard to make sure that the characters and story in Naughty Dog's games are as engaging and entertaining as anything people would see in a movie theater, and I think that, in the way that you describe him, Nathan Drake really typifies that. His look was deliberately bare-bones. We wanted to get across the sense that Nate crash-lands on the island with literally just the shirt on his back, and has to salvage the things he finds in the environment to survive. That definitely helped dictate his simple "jeans and sneakers" look.
Nate is very much a regular guy who finds himself in an extraordinary situation, and so of course that had an influence on his "everyman" character design. We thought about the way that leaving the depiction of a character a little bit open to interpretation can give an audience an opportunity to invest that character with stronger emotions than they otherwise might be able to, and that helped guide us too.
But perhaps above all else it's the quality of the performances—the writing, the acting and direction, the animation, and the musical score—that really give Drake and the other characters in Uncharted such entertaining life. We don't think he really looks like Jason Rubin, either—although I did do a double-take the other day when I walked past the conference room and saw Jason playing Uncharted, wearing blue jeans and a white long-sleeved t-shirt!

Of course, Elena really helps things along. I love that she's totally not a token bimbo. She plays a smart resourceful role and plays incredibly well off of Nathan. Did the actors work together in the studio?
[Amy] The actors performed all their mocap scenes together, and even did some of their voice recording together. So it was really important for them to have good chemistry, because they'd be working together a lot. We picked up on the playful energy between Nolan North (Drake) and Emily Rose (Elena) even in their first audition together; right away it seemed like they'd be a good match.
We always wanted Elena to be a self-reliant, fully-realized character in her own right, not just a foil for Drake. Emily really brought the character to life, and gave her a spunky, girl-next-door quality that was just perfect for the role.

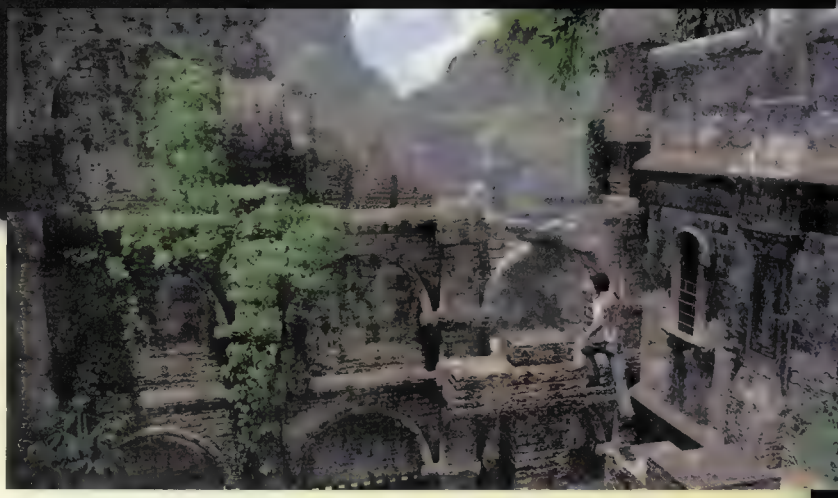
Pretty awesome that she's a playable character after you beat the game. How many different characters can you go through it as? Do the cinematics adjust?
[Amy] We thought it would be fun to give the player different character "skins" as bonus rewards. There are twelve different unlockable characters and costumes for the player to earn, which includes skins of all of the game's principal characters. They all still use Drake's moveset and animation rig, of course (so it's a little comical to see a broad-shouldered Elena beating the crap out of a 250-pound pirate), but it's all just for fun. (Drake still appears in the cinematics, because all our movies are pre-rendered in the game engine).

The best next-gen games have just the right amount of gelatinous sheen about them and I love how you've varied it by the topography. If a game doesn't employ it now, it really sticks out but it's difficult to get just right. Is there a lot of tweaking involved in how each surface reacts to light?
[Bruce Straley, *Co-Art Director*] Yeah, we pretty much hand tweak every surface in the game. Whether it's a leaf or an eroding Spanish stucco wall, someone had to go in and lovingly tweak all the material properties for each surface. Also our lighting varies pretty significantly from environment to environment, so that means the shaders have to be tweaked a little differently in each level. We were very aware of the next-gen call for shader features, but we're also going for a reality of sorts with our rendering. So if there was a stone wall sitting in exposed sunlight, it looked downright wrong to have too high of a specularity on it. Even though we have a lot of bells and whistles in our bag of tricks, we had to really use constraints at times and think about the overall look, not just "how crazy cool can I make this surface!"

Another thing I appreciate is that aside from a shimmer on dropped weapons you don't use any markers outside of the context-sensitive button maneuvers. I like the option of pressing L2 to point you in the general direction but for the most part you let the environments do the talking. You can even tell where erosion might cause you to fall. You must have really studied various surfaces. Did you make a few field trips?
[Bruce] If using Google to find references is a field trip, then yes, we made A LOT of field trips! Actually to be serious, we had no clue what kind of pain we were setting ourselves up for when we started making next-gen graphics. Coming from a world of textures and polygons, and being asked to work proficiently in a world of final gather lighting, indirect illumination, specularity, fresnel angles, and normal maps, it's a heck of a steep hill to climb. I could simply be on my way to grab a bite to eat, and be

"...we pretty much hand tweak every surface in the game. Whether it's a leaf or an eroding Spanish stucco wall..."

Bruce Straley



struck dumb staring at a leaf on a bush, a cloud formation, the motion of the wind, etc. Anything could perplex me. I could never blindly move through the world again. I had to study and figure out every surface's properties! It was a terrific eye opener, and a great curse at the same time. I can only imagine what other people thought of me staring at the pavement for an hour!

How difficult is it designing set pieces where the environments play such a key role? There must be a very fine line between making things too conspicuous and impossible to find... How do you balance a game that's so organic? I mean, you don't want guys like me to walk through it but you don't want new users getting flustered either...

[Bruce] Ahhh, the million dollar question! Organic environments are probably the most difficult environments to steer a player effectively through while retaining its organic-ness. We did struggle with this, but for us internally, we actually thought the paths were too obvious at first. We got too familiar with the layout and knew too much about where to go. When we did our first focus test, it was a real eye opener for us how often people were getting lost. They would try to climb on ledges that didn't even exist in geometry. It would be a crack in the normal map that the light just so happened to be hitting at the right (or wrong in this case) direction. We could push so many polygons and do so many shading effects on the PS3, the sheer amount of detail was just overwhelming to the new player. We had to accept the truth from the focus tests, and use this fresh perspective to tell us when we needed to highlight a path a little more, what cracks to delete, when to shift a UV, and when to accentuate the path with either a light, a texture change, or maybe use some strategic placement of plants. After a focus test or two we were able to create more of an internal language of do's and don'ts for background construction. There's a very fine line when things move from "I'm having fun adventuring around, looking for where to go next," to "OMG WHERE THE HELL DO I GO NEXT?!" We tried our best to keep it on the fun adventurous side.

One thing about Uncharted that does take me back to Tomb Raider is the music, and how effectively it's used to set the tone. It has all the makings of a John Williams soundtrack. Was this achieved in-house? What's the story behind the game's soundtrack?

[Amy] We wanted the music to be exciting and epic, but not too *retro*, since the story is set in the present-day, with a contemporary hero. We listened to stacks of soundtrack CDs, trying to home in on a sound for our game, and I kept coming back to Greg Edmonson's score for the *Firefly* TV series. I loved the way he combined ethnic and traditional instruments to create a sound that was simultaneously familiar and unexpected. And because our story centers so much on the collision of different historical, cultural and environmental elements, he seemed like a perfect match for the project. So we got in touch with him about a year and a half ago, when it was time to score our debut E3 trailer, and we've been working together ever since. Greg had never done music for a video game before—which was great, because he approached the project as if he were scoring a film, and his music really elevates the cinematic quality of the game. He ultimately wrote almost two hours of original music for Uncharted, and worked closely with our music supervisors in the SCEA Music Group to deconstruct all the tracks to create a cutting-edge adaptive score. The entire game is literally scored from beginning to end, not with cycling video game music, but with tracks that interactively swell from ambient instrumentation to full-on combat tension. And just as I'd hoped, our score combines traditional orchestral elements (we recorded the majority of the score at Skywalker Sound, with a live orchestra) and unusual ethnic woodwinds, strings and percussion, to create a sound that is completely unique to Uncharted.

Is there anything you wanted to get in or do that for one reason or another you couldn't or is Uncharted everything you wanted it to be?

[Amy] Sure, there are always dozens of little things you wish you could have done, if you'd only had enough time—but in the end, all the edits you make along the way actually help to focus the final product. And any really great features that have fallen by the wayside inevitably find their way into the sequel! But I've got to say, I've been doing this for 18 years now, and Uncharted is without doubt the best and most fully realized game I've ever worked on.

Although the PS3 got off to a slow start, Sony has wisely proclaimed a 10-year plan; there's just been a price drop, and between MotorStorm, Eye of Judgment, Heavenly Sword, Ratchet, and Uncharted the first-party horse is out of the gate pumped with go-juice. I mean, if this is your first game I can't even fathom what lies ahead. How much more tech is in the tank? How much have you tapped the cells?

[Evan] Much like the PlayStation 2, the PS3 has an enormous amount of potential that is going to take several years to fully take advantage of. The amount of optimization that can take place with a little bit of effort is extraordinary. This is particularly true with the SPUs on the Cell processor. It really seems like they are a bottomless pit of processing power. For a while our game was frequently CPU bound, but as we started moving more and more of our systems over to the Cell, that problem was quickly alleviated. And even after moving our bucketing, physics, AI, particles and everything else over to the SPUs we are still only using somewhere between 1/3 to ½ of the Cell's power.

Unbelievable. So, the big question... Is Uncharted planned as a franchise? Are you guys up for another Jak & Daxter-type run or are you thinking about developing more original content? Perhaps getting into dual projects?

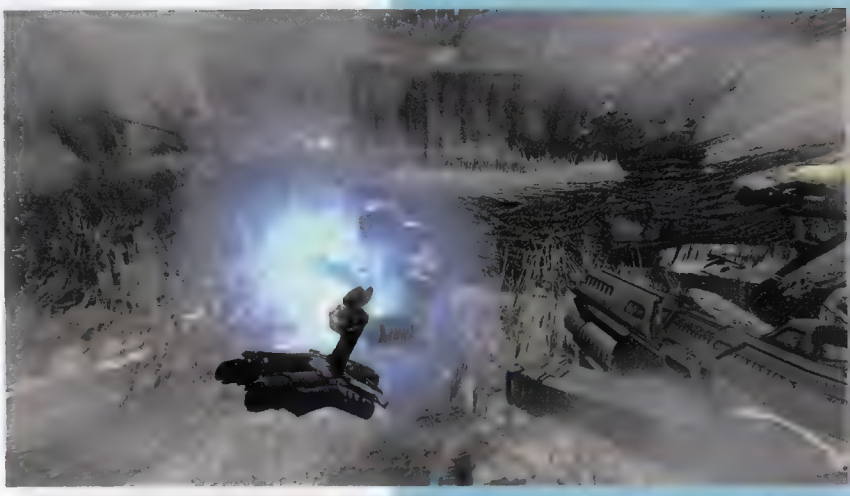
[Evan] Uncharted was definitely conceived of as a franchise. The pulp action adventure genre was built around the idea of serialization and continued episodes. But of course, I don't think that Naughty Dog is ready to completely leave Jak and Daxter in our past, so we have plenty of options available to us.

Iron and the Maiden sure would make a helluva GTA style game...and don't you know the guy who created it? Seriously though, have you thought about taking on a sandbox project? You've conquered platforming and adventure...

[Evan] Sandbox games are a whole lot of fun and definitely a unique challenge to create. We've always tried to raise the bar higher for storytelling in video games and doing something as non-linear as a sandbox game would certainly flex our creative muscles, so it's surely an intriguing proposition. But the whole "Iron and the Maiden" thing... I'm not so sure about that.

MUSIC NOTES

One thing that all great adventures have in common, whether it's a feature film or video game, is a memorable soundtrack to define both the characters and the action. Naughty Dog recruited the talents of *Firefly* tunesmith Greg Edmonson for Uncharted and the result is the pinnacle of music, meant to set the mood and drive the action.



Timeshift

TimeShift is better than Halo 3. Well, not at all really, but I will say I enjoyed exploding bodies with TimeShift's shotgun more than I did in Halo 3 and most other first-person shooters this year, and I do love a good close-quarter kill. The satisfying death-by-shotgun is made even more deliciously fun when time is brought to a halt and you unload shell after shell into a group of frozen soldiers, watching them dissolve in a bloody flash as time is fully restored. Stopping, rewinding, and slowing time in TimeShift is predictable and overly reliant, but it does give the somewhat tepid action a good kick when it needs it most.

"The satisfying death-by-shotgun is made even more deliciously fun when time is brought to a halt..."

The shotgun may be fun, and there's an energy gun toward the end of the game that is equally destructive in just the right ways—the game does a good job of gathering steam as it unfolds—but that doesn't mean TimeShift is loads of fun waiting around every turn. The enemy can be pretty dumb, ignoring explosions and death all around them, sitting still and firing away without much care. There's a limited strategy to the run-and-gun, and you have to put up with a stream of common and underwhelming shootouts in the duller levels.

Using your special suit to toy with the flow of time is fundamental not only in combat, but in manipulating the environment to tackle simple puzzles. The power can be deployed automatically or bypassed for what you want exactly in the routinely obvious moment. There's never anything very clever in what you face, which is really a shame given the cool possibilities the game's premise affords. This extends to the design of the characters and world overall; at the end you face some interesting opponents who have powers of their own, but it's too little too late.

One of TimeShift's problems is a general lack of development. There are some neat moments, like the shootout in a giant zeppelin, and occasionally a very cool set piece showcases chunks of an engaging vision. The clean, capable look is just enough to feel fully next-gen yet never pops.

No, TimeShift is not better than Halo 3 or the many other high-quality first-person shooters packing this holiday lineup. It's a decent game that feels ultimately out of its league.

Timeshift score 7.5

\+ Visually pleasing, time powers simple but fun

– Underdesigned universe and mechanics

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Saber Interactive
Publisher	Sierra
Online/Multi	1-16
ESRB Rating	M
Available	November

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MASS effect

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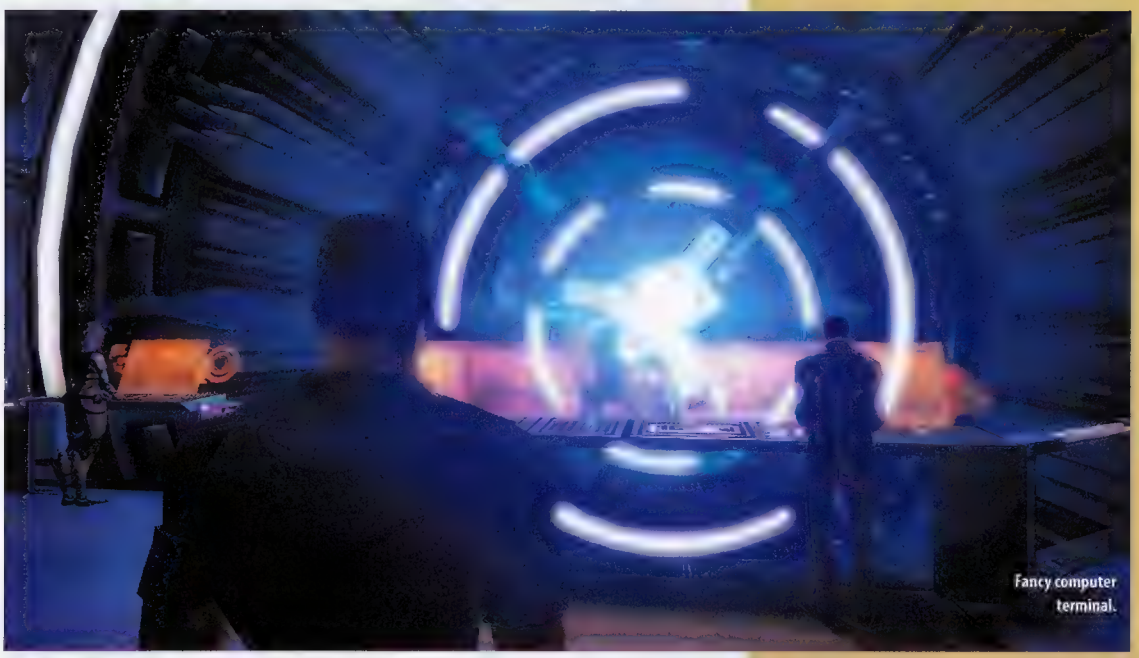
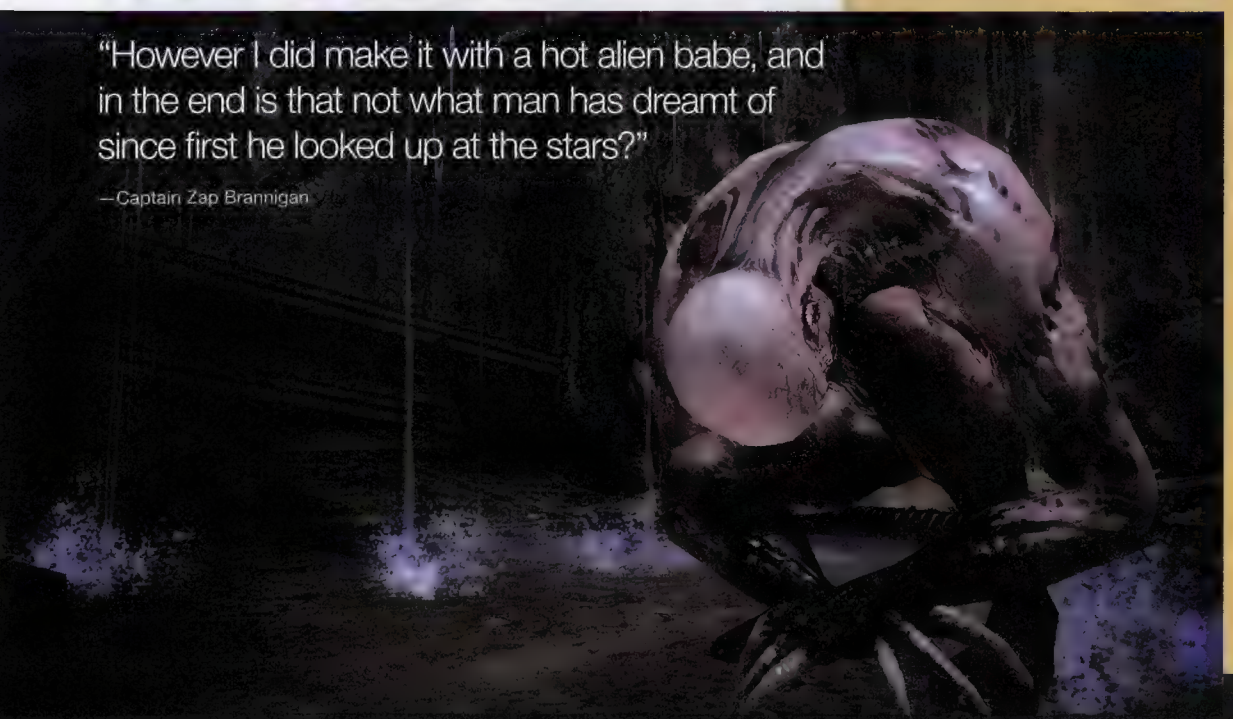


Fancy computer terminal.


"However I did make it with a hot alien babe, and in the end is that not what man has dreamt of since first he looked up at the stars?"
—Captain Zap Brannigan

Mass Effect

Score: 8.5

+	Lots of things to do, and enemies to shoot; good puzzles
–	Lacks the breadth and depth of previous BioWare games; characters aren't spectacular

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	BioWare
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	No
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	M

MX vs. ATV Untamed

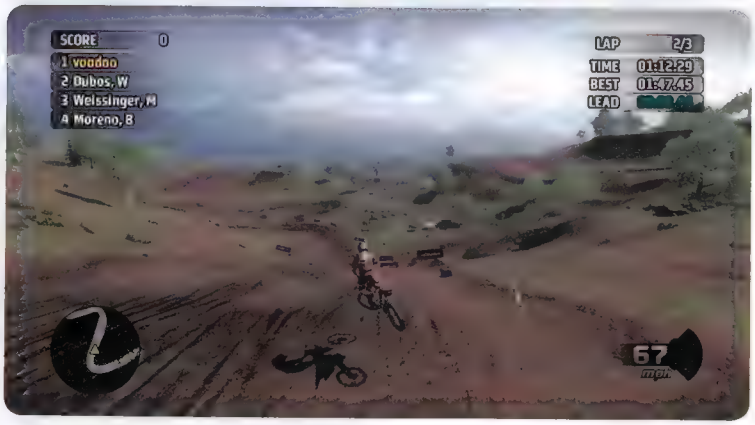
Right on track

Coming off of Evolution Studios remarkable MotorStorm I've been pining for the first multi-console off-road racer ever since. Where MotorStorm was PS3-only and more of an Enduro, MX vs. ATV Untamed gives us our first taste of cross-platform multi-vehicle mayhem including the first-ever motocross venues, all developed exclusively for the 360 and PS3. Wisely THQ hired entirely separate studios for the respective versions, allowing Rainbow to devote their full attention to delivering a next-gen racing experience worthy of their namesake. Similar to past outings the emphasis in Untamed is on that all-important connection between the player and the terrain via whatever vehicle you happen to be riding or driving. They've added significantly to the game elsewhere too, but not so much that it's become a simulation-oriented affair. Bike and rider customization is at an all-time high representing every major outfitter along with a vast assortment of vehicles, all of which can be personalized down to the color of the hand grips. It's also packed with venues: You can play a Quick or Custom Event (Hill climbs, Waypoint, Free rides, Minimoto, Freestyle…), mini-games, split-screen multiplayer, or with up to 12 players online, but the meat is where it should be, in the Event Series or all-new X-Cross Tournament where you'll find a smorgasbord of racing events including Outdoor Nationals, Supercross, SuperMoto, Opencross, Freestyle, Supertruck, Minimoto, Waypoint, and Endurocross (imagine a Supercross track strewn with embedded boulders, logs, and waterholes… You're basically a two-wheeled ping-pong ball), spread across multiple vehicle types depending on preference and venue. Sand Rails, Trophy Trucks, Monster Trucks, ORV Sports, 4x4 Golf Carts, ATVs, Minis, and MX bikes are all yours for the taking, piloted by the Pro Rider or creation of your choice and customizable with hundreds of parts and accessories. Tuning is straightforward and purely elective with an emphasis on feel over performance and designed to get you out of the menus and onto the tracks with as little complications as possible. You can set the amount of laps to three, five, or seven and choose either Quick or Classic series, and then it's onto the staging area where you can mess around while the track loads… Once the starting gate drops you begin to see why they call it Untamed. First-turn traffic is wild as a dozen riders fight to grab the holeshot. Just making it out without getting center-punched or run off the track takes

"Once the starting gate drops you begin to see why they called it Untamed."

Minimoto! Little bikes; BIG action!

Xbox 360

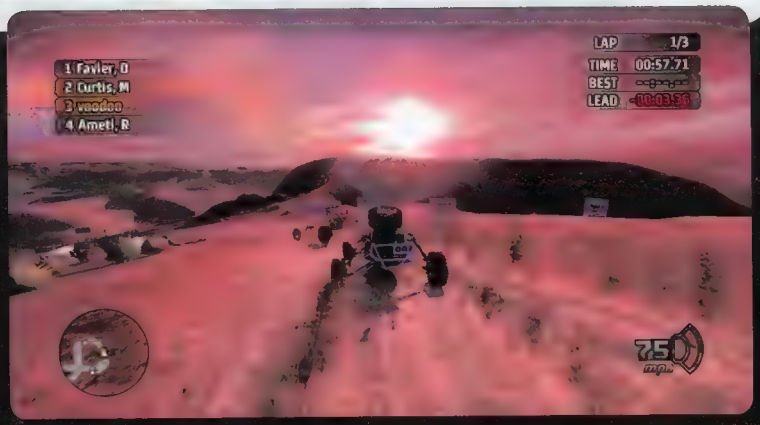


practice, and then it's time to make your way through the pack... The tracks are the gameplay in Untamed. Next-gen racing doesn't rely on preloading; it's purely a throttle/braking/physics-based affair as you negotiate the vast array of courses, leaving fresh tracks as you traverse the realistically varied and rutted terrain. There are no invisible walls to keep you on course and any off-camber sections will catapult you in the relative direction. Mud feels like mud, water like water, and sand like sand. Landing too hard will drill you into the dirt while forward/backward rider positioning delivers or eases power to the back wheel and has a direct effect on landing and cornering. You will wipe out in Untamed, a lot at first and then less and less as you become accustomed to each vehicle's AI. Still, there's no avoiding the odd cheap shot. Thankfully, Rainbow has accounted for this by making the competition just as susceptible. If you're fighting for the lead in lap two of a three-lap race and get tangled up in a wreck for instance, a good lap will put you right back up with the front runners. You can only restart after a race is run anyway, so you might as well get back on the horse. The other caveat in Untamed, relegated mainly to the Motocross, is staying on the track. Real physics and terrain take a while to get used to, but once you're in the zone, man, does it feel good. I've never felt as free and in control as I do playing either the ATVs or MX bikes in Untamed.

Visually, Untamed doesn't have that wall-to-wall normal-mapped sheen that MotorStorm did, but it more than makes up for it in rider animation and course design—the outdoor Nationals especially. The courses and surrounding areas are second to none and the feeling of authenticity is uncanny. I also adore the Minimoto series. The trucks and sand rails are cool too but the bikes and quads deliver a feeling that no racing game has ever managed. I love sitting back and watching my performance in replay, picking out fine details like leaving tracks in pristine mud or a spectator videotaping.

The only bone I have to pick with Untamed, other than the steep learning curve and wild AI, is the music. You can turn it off, but you shouldn't have to. I know that having edgy nu-metal bands helps sell games (I suppose), but racing music should be vocal free and made to fuse with the action (see Ridge Racer). The music in Untamed is 100% distraction. It belongs on your iPod (if cliché alt metal/punk is your thing) not in a game.

Moving over to the Wii version, kindly disregard most of what I just said. Developed by Incinerator Studios, the Wii version pales in comparison. It contains most of the features, albeit in scaled-down form interrupted by mucho loading, but visually it's maybe on par with the series' old PS2 offerings; not that that's necessarily bad. The control is actually really cool using the Wiimote and the Nunchuk, but it's just plain hard to look at next to the PS3 or 360 games. The racing itself being what it is—Incinerator does fight hard to make it feel similar—along with the grand scale of it all (it's by far the biggest racing game on the console), the game still has merit, it just doesn't deliver the visuals. THQ would have been well served to abandon the realistic look and opt for a more cel-shaded or exaggerated game on Wii. Trying to shoehorn a 360/PS3 game onto the Wii is like getting a Super Model to woof down a 10-pound ham. What comes out the other side just isn't pretty. Still tastes okay though!



MX vs. ATV: Untamed (Xbox 360) score

MX vs. ATV: Untamed (Wii) score

+	Massive, almost never-ending gameplay. Amazing graphics and AI on PS3 and 360
-	Wii version pales visually, music must be turned off

System(s)	PS2, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360
Developer	Incinerator (Wii), Rainbow Studios (360/PS3)
Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	Multiplayer, 12-player network
Available	December
ESRB Rating	T

"I've never felt as free and in control as I do playing either the ATVs or MX bikes in Untamed."

The Wii game is good by Wii standards...

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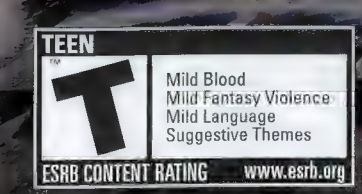

PlayStation Portable

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Super Mario Galaxy

Plumbing the cosmos

words Dave Halverson

Vindication has never tasted so sweet. I've caught more grief than I care to mention over my misgivings on how Wii games seem grossly underpowered, but now it's official: 9 out of 10 Wii games are made on the cheap, with an emphasis on cashing in over performance. As relieved as I am that the Wii is more than a skinny PS2, however, I'm more confused at this point. I've never seen such a huge gap between first- and third-party software. If you thought Metroid Prime 3: Corruption and TLoZ: Twilight Princess looked great, you're in for a serious system shock. We were lead to believe that the Wii's development tools were designed to make development easy. So why then does Super Mario Galaxy eclipse everything on the system by such a wide margin?

Since the dawn of the modern video gaming era, brought about by Nintendo, Mario has been the beacon of the very essence of gaming. More than any other single character Mario games have been the definitive games of their era—a legacy that began to erode as gaming graduated from its fantasy/skills roots to a more realistic, mainstream pastime. Mario's last major console outing, Super Mario Sunshine—one of the greatest platformers of its time—was met with mixed reviews;

a first for any Mario game. Super Mario Galaxy puts the series right back on track. It may be the fourth major first-party release for the Wii, but it is without a doubt the most eventful—a reinstatement of Mario's place not only in gaming, but in popular culture. As redefining an experience as Super Mario 64 was, and we can all remember how that game made us feel, Super Mario Galaxy is the most profound game since Super Mario Bros. defined action gaming on the NES.

There's something almost transcendental about SMG. I no longer see him as a squat Pisano in red plumber's overalls. For the first time Mario feels like an icon—like a super star. As much as I've always loved Mario games it's always been in spite of the character himself, but there's something special about SMG that dispels Mario's squatness—a surreal quality that elevates it beyond its trademark cheerfulness. Outer space really agrees with the little guy.

Mario past and present: Magnificent.

I'd almost forgotten what originality felt like—not the token hooks that qualify as innovation these days, but a completely original action-platforming experience. The gameplay in SMG is so fresh and utterly crisp it's like going back in time to when each new game was brimming with mystery. Only this one looks the part—coated in bump mapping, crazy reflections, gorgeous water, particle effects, fur effects, dynamic lighting, seamless models and vivid color. Who knew the Wii could do any of this, and how miraculous that the gameplay matches the visual splendor. SMG revolves around six observatories on a massive alien mothership/hub, each housing a string of theme-based galaxies. Completing each mission in a galaxy bears a Power Star leading up to the final boss for each observatory, which renders a Grand Star. Grand Stars help power the mother ship, opening up new observatories that grant access to new galaxies until all of the stars are returned, revealing the center of the universe where, of course, Princess Peach awaits rescue from Bowser. With 120 stars to collect you can imagine how big a game SMG is. Each galaxy consists of a constellation of individual "planetoids," ranging from spherical planets to floating islands to the completely original and almost indescribable. One of my favorites consists of rubbery formations Mario adheres to for you to pull back and launch to the next, while another features a galactic water park where Mario "surfs" on a manta ray, demonstrating what a Wii version of Wave Race might feel like. There are plenty of diversions too, from Prankster Comets to individual galaxies accessible by feeding Lumas—the star-like creatures that inhabit the mothership along with the beautiful (especially for a Mario game) Rosalina. There's Bee Mario (what came first by the way: Bee Mario or Bee Movie?...) Rainbow Mario, Boo Mario, Spring Mario, Fire Mario, Ice Mario...SMG gives new meaning to the term "play mechanics."

The first in a string of unforgetable bosses.

Planetoids: The best thing to happen to platformers since the jump button.

"Who knew the Wii could do any of this, and how miraculous that the gameplay matches the visual splendor."

But not so much by the obvious powers that each Mario form implies; the gravity-based action on the whole is what defines the experience. The spherical nature of the gameplay is entirely new. Scouring the outside as Mario walks around the circumference, the camera stays fixed allowing you to play upside down exactly as you would right side up. You can also on many occasions jump into the core of a world to negotiate a myriad of ultra-clever platforming venues within. It's almost like negotiating an Escher painting. All the while star bits are the currency of choice, emitted from the enemies you pop, hiding in flower beds, on trees, or just floating around. You can collect star bits simply by pointing at them, or fire them to stun enemies. The key move in the game, though, is the spin performed by shaking the Wiimote after which walking into an enemy boots them away. Spinning also allows you to jump higher and to redirect while soaring around the galaxy. You can spin as much as you like as long as your Luma (Mario has one of his very own) is safely tucked away. They become dislodged for a second after each spin, leaving you vulnerable, creating an interesting little strategy when attacking multiple enemies…say when dozens of Goombas are wobbling towards you on a planet shaped like Yoshi's head. Mario's patented triple jump and wall jump are back too along with more dreamy underwater sequences, and new powers like skating, freezing water, flying, donning a giant spring or becoming a specter…with a hat on. This is Nunchuk and Wiimote control at its very finest. The game's design is so perfectly married to the control that it's hard to imagine playing it any other way. Wasn't that what the Wii was supposed to be all about by the way? The boss fighting is also the best yet for the series, which is hard to believe given how amazing past challengers have been. They're simply spectacular in both form and function, each gigantic spectacle a sheer pleasure to take down. I must mention the music too as it sets the perfect tone for the adventure. There's the usual measure of trademark sound effects and jovial tempos, but otherwise SMG features a piano-based soundtrack that literally sweeps you away. Remember the first swimming level in SM 64? …Like that, only better.

You realize how complacent we've become as gamers playing a game like this…how tolerant people have become of mediocrity. This is what gaming in the year 2007 is supposed to feel like. The vast majority of the publishers out there are getting a free ride via licensing, copycatting, or cutting corners. The fact of the matter is that there are precious few Wii games that even come close to SMG at the moment and only two ahead that I can think of. Now that I've seen what the system can do, however, I look to the console's future with new optimism. Sorry Reggie: we hardcore guys are hanging on for our lives. Now call Treasure and tell 'em to fire up the Wario machine!

Super Mario Galaxy — score **10**

\+ The most innovative platforming gameplay in years, gorgeous next-gen-like graphics, supreme polish, beautiful soundtrack

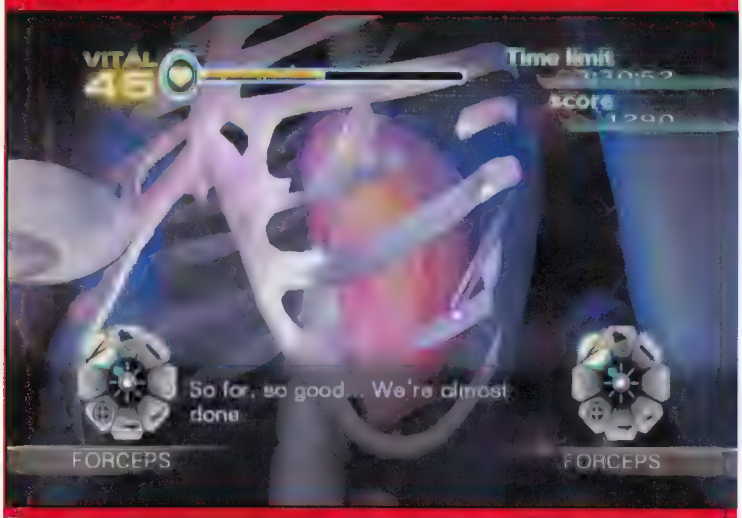
– Imagining how long we'll have to wait for another.

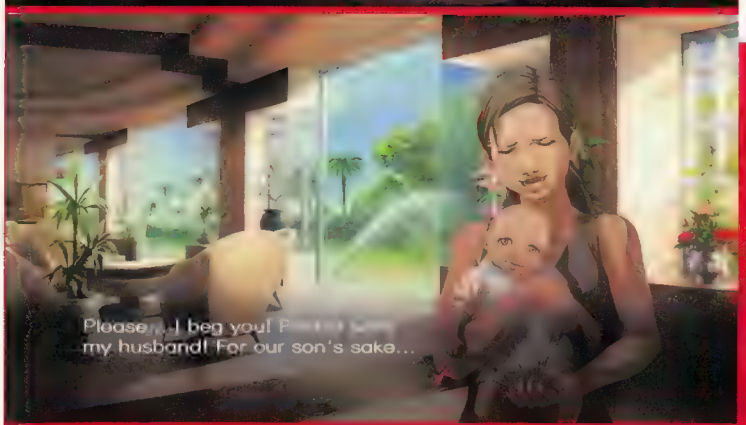
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Nintendo EAD Tokyo
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	2-player (co-star) co-op
ESRB Rating	E
Available	November 12

Trauma Center New Blood

No insurance? Do it yourself!

words | Danny Campbell





Well, we're already getting sequels on the Wii. Pardon if I'm beginning to sound disillusioned, but it's infinitely frustrating to see a machine so full of potential being bogged down by mini-games and expansions. It makes me want to scream at the entire industry.

Still, Trauma Center: Second Opinion was one of my favorite games during the launch window for the Wii, and New Blood delivers more of the same joy. What's more, the game has a two-player cooperative mode, which is entirely fun. Sharing the ridiculous dialogue with another doctor, and stumbling through the operations while shouting "Damn it, nurse, I need it the forceps NOW!" is a great way to spend an afternoon. More than, say, Mario Party, Trauma Center is actually a delight to share...because it gives you a genre to play in. It's like a murder-party for your Wii, without the heavy-handedness of being designed as such.

Though the title's actual interaction is faux-surgical, it's the voice-over dialogue that makes the game shine. This time, you follow the stories of Dr. Vaughn and Blaylock, who are two doctors on the Alaskan frontier. Like the '90s television series *Northern Exposure*, these doctors are overqualified for their positions... and the tension of the game comes from their interactions with locals. As with Second Opinion, New Blood has a large plot to be uncovered that features things you wouldn't usually find in a hospital. I'm talking conspiracies, people. Conspiracies...and the return of the Healing Touch.

Part of me wishes someone would make an actual surgery simulator for the Wii. On second thought that would be nasty. I do however wish there were more serious games in general for the system. I love the campy play of Trauma—how can you not when we get doctors who insist on starting every surgery by pointing two fingers in the air—but I'm hoping that Atlus follow up with something original. Perhaps it's time to take things on the road with Paramedic Pandemonium!

Only you can make sure this creepy child grows up with a father.

"Well, we're already getting sequels on the Wii."

Trauma Center: New Blood	score 7.0
+	Stellar localization, leader boards, and two-player mode!
–	It's more of the same

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Atlus
Publisher	Atlus
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	November 20, 2007

Naruto: Rise of a Ninja

words Casey Lee

The countryside around Leaf Village is breathtaking.

Like many other anime-licensed series, Naruto games come out so frequently and with such inconsistent quality that my brain has, as a defense mechanism, blocked them out entirely. Indeed, I have become so strongly conditioned to ignore anime-licensed games that you could drop a crate of them onto my head and I would feel nothing more than a light breeze. But by putting effort, money, and a healthy dose of originality into Rise of a Ninja, Ubisoft has finally made a Naruto game that is capable of punching through my defenses. Rise of a Ninja isn't a masterpiece, but it's good enough that even those with no interest in the series should consider picking it up.

Rise of a Ninja is a sandbox game centered in Leaf Village, a vast and beautiful city that acts as the game's central hub. Leaf Village is so large that even several hours into its quest you'll be discovering new sections that you hadn't visited before, yet it streams so seamlessly that you could dash through it for hours without noticing more than brief frame-rate hiccups. The city's multi-tiered buildings and winding allies are a perfect playground for Naruto to double-jump, leap, and dash through, and I happily spent hours doing just that as I hunted for the city's hundreds of optional collectibles.

Like Crackdown, Rise of a Ninja's main quest pales in comparison to the simpler joys of its open-world. One of the game's goals is to win over the 250 residents of Leaf Village, all of whom hate you at the start of the game. You can accomplish that with roof-top coin hunts, street races, games of hide-and-seek, high-speed ramen deliveries, and targeting lovelorn villagers with your Sexy Jutsu (don't ask). (Unfortunately, while all of these mini-games are fun for a while, some of them get infuriatingly hard towards the end, thanks in part to some very deceptive guide arrows.) The 20 or so storyline missions typically send you to the half-dozen areas outside of Leaf Village, and feature a mix of free exploration, timed races, and tree-top platforming sequences, before ending with a series of one-on-one martial-arts duels.

I wish the fighting system were as light, fast, and fun as the rest of the game. But instead of drawing inspiration from Super Smash Bros. or the Clash of Ninja series, the developers went for a conventional Tekken-esque fighter that focuses on basic punch-and-kick combos. There are a few unique touches, like the ability to warp behind your foe with a well-timed parry and Jutsu moves that trigger little mini-games, but they don't keep the fighting system fresh for long. It certainly doesn't help that the game only allows you to play as Naruto in the Story Mode, even though the game's own storyline usually has him working in a team with Sakura and Sasuke (who are playable in Fight Mode).

But while having to duel with countless bandits is a chore in Story Mode, the dedicated Fight Mode squeezes a lot more fun out of the combat system. Here you can choose from 12 characters (one unlockable), most of whom do feel substantially different, and earn achievements by taking each one through an online tournament (you can also play against the computer, but there are no achievements for that). Fight Mode isn't going to cut into the sales of Virtua Fighter 5 any, but it's a fun addition that extends the life of the game significantly. And that's important, since the game's Story Mode is pretty short—you could easily beat it in under 8 hours, although the many side quests effectively double its length.

Rise of a Ninja defies categorization with its open-world structure, RPG pacing, and eccentric mix of mini-games and one-on-one combat. But whatever genre this is, it's clearly one that is not currently being well-served on the 360, and you don't need to be a Naruto fan to appreciate that.

"Like Crackdown, Rise of a Ninja's main quest pales in comparison to the simpler joys of its open-world."

Naruto: Rise of a Ninja — score **8.0**

\+ Crackdown-esque open-world fun, beautiful cell-shaded world

– Story Mode is very short, fights lack variety

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	Online Fighting
ESRB Rating	T
Available	November

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

words Brady Fiechter

Destructible environments; always a plus.

Kane and Lynch aren't your typical antagonistic action-movie buddies, taking pot shots at one another while a pleasant friendship waits in the background. They hate each other; the only reason for toleration is that going their separate ways means Kane loses his wife and child and Lynch will likely have a bullet sent through the back of his skull.

Lynch, you learn early on, is completely nuts. In one of the game's better scenes, he unloads mercilessly on a group of innocents while you guide Kane through a foiled bank robbery; on the run outside in the police-infested city streets, a woman is writhing on the ground as Lynch routinely fires a shotgun pointblank. And then there's the moment where he freaks out and kills a valuable hostage, really for no other reason than it just made sense at the time.

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men is extremely violent but rarely graphic. It wisely doesn't rely on blood splatter and gruesome deaths to get under your skin, opting instead for grim scenarios that play out with sudden intensity. I certainly wasn't expecting to jump from a makeshift grave in a construction site and beat my captive to death with a shovel, but that's what you get when playing Kane & Lynch.

The relationship forged between Kane and Lynch is a refreshing and bold approach for a video game, and if you forgive the strained attempts at authentic grit and depth of character (note: screaming f**k every other word is not the ticket), there's at least enough going on between the irascible pair to provide nasty color to what is a pretty hit-and-miss experience.

"I certainly wasn't expecting to jump from a makeshift grave in a construction site and beat my captive to death with a shovel..."

The game tries so hard to fit in the "this is truly for adults" category you can practically see the machinations of the story and settings grinding sparks. It's also heavily borrowing from a variety of fast-food movie cliches, which leak on down into the gameplay.

Developer IO Interactive chose to run with stealth in Hitman, but here the order of the day is endless action. While there are some fun scenes of destruction—I liked dropping grenades out the back of a truck while on a manic high-speed run from the cops—the heavy-handed control and clumsy character movement never allows you to get fully immersed in the experience. Not helping matters are those confused enemies who like to run straight at you or do nothing but stand around and wait their turn to die.

There's an inconsistency to the overall design quality that really kept me at a distance while playing Kane & Lynch. One moment you might find something to like while the next an egregious hole in the gameplay fabric trips you up. A big offender is the light squad-based play: Lynch and whomever else you're barking orders to might decide to be helpful, or as often as not shoot into walls or run around looking helpless or just not respond to what you really want or need in the moment.

Having to deal with Lynch is, like too much else in the game, a clunky, half-baked affair.

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men — score 6.0

\+ Relationship between Kane and Lynch is interesting

– Clunky and plodding; the action is oddly low key

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	IO Interactive
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	1-8
ESRB Rating	M
Available	November

Battalion Wars 2

The war at home

words Dave Halverson

By the time you read this Battalion Wars 2 will have been out some three weeks, and it barley made the issue. Normally we receive reviewables from Nintendo in plenty of time to get the word out before the game hits but in BW2 and SMG's case, it was all we could do to get them into this issue. My second most anticipated Wii game of the year, I hope it's not too late to convince you that it's the other must-have Wii game of the holiday season. Like SMG, although not quite to the extent, BW2's tech is first-rate. Painstakingly constructed environments, beautiful water effects, reflections, and lighting—it's a handsome game, although what makes this particular series so alluring are the character and vehicle designs (and the gameplay of course). I'll take Kuju's super-deformed-meets-comic-book art style and special breed of tactical squad-based action over a pile of Rainbow Six's or Counterstrikes any day of the week... And this one has it all, including online. I come for the Campaign though and once again I found myself thoroughly engaged in the art of fake war.

Set centuries after the Solar Empire defeated Lord Ferrok and his iron legion—cleverly integrated as the game's tutorial/prologue—BW2 gets underway as the Anglo Isle's military machine declares war on the Solar Empire based on intel that they possess a super-weapon (remind you of anything?). Your mission, initially, is to stave off the insurgence and defend the Solar Empire under the command of Empress Lei-Qo and A-Quira… But we all know what's brewing. When all is said and done five nations will join the fray along with the sinewy Colonel Windsor and his Anglo Army, all of which you will command.

This is a game born for the Wiimote and Nunchuk and Kuju makes the best of it. An aiming reticule locks onto whatever you point at onscreen using Z, after which pressing A performs the required function. So, after locking onto an enemy target pressing A will send your selected troop to assault, or by locking onto a troop member you can command that group

"It's been a rocky year for me and my Wii, but I'm happy to be capping it off with MP3: Corruption, Super Mario Galaxy and this little gem."

to wait or follow. Lock onto one of your tanks and you climb aboard. This simple command together with selecting troops on the d-pad makes BW2 an absolute breeze to navigate, leaving you free to concentrate on blowing shit up. Combined with the new graphics and probably the best voice acting of any Nintendo game (Lei-Qo is especially wonderful), this is one extremely polished Wii game. Also new for BW2 is the ability to command naval units. Battleships, frigates, submarines, dreadnoughts and transports add considerably to the game's dossier including those loveable grunts—bazooka, flame, assault, anti-air and mortar veterans, and of course those wonderful ground vehicles and air units. The game is fully voiced, riddled with snarky CGI cinemas, features three camera angles and a comprehensive on- and off-screen map system so you can't get lost or frustrated. Normally I'd balk at so much prodding but in BW2's case there's a lot to process, so it's welcome, although I dislike that you're penalized for time. I like to soak it all in as I play, so I don't appreciate having my level grade average brought down because I wanted to check out the detail in a forest or how the water rolls along the shoreline. Something tells me I'll live though.

It's been a rocky year for me and my Wii, but I'm happy to be capping it off with MP3: Corruption, Super Mario Galaxy and this little gem. I just hope there are more where these came from...

Battalion Wars 2 — score 9.5

+	Efficient control scheme, great online features, awesome character and world design, great voice acting, xlnt detail and graphics for a Wii game
-	A bit much on the prodding side, penalties for not rushing, dodging and jumping a little dodgy on the Nunchuk, helicopter controls a bit wobbly

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Kuju
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	Co-op, MP Assault and Skirmish
Available	October 29
ESRB Rating	T

Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction

The future is now

words Brady Fiechter

Ratchet realizes how awesome factories are.

"The gameplay is so good, so refined, so pure and fun, and yet you cannot ignore how much the presentation makes this game a real triumph."

If there really is no such thing as perfection, someone forgot to inform Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction to the absolute truths of the universe. At least to my universe. See, the thing is, there was not one moment in this pure joy of a game that let me down or made me wish it was tweaked just slightly differently, and I can't say that about any game I've played this year. Perhaps in the end I enjoyed, say, BioShock more on a different level, but there are plenty of things that irked me during that experience. Tools of Destruction nails every mark.

For the most part, Ratchet fans know the basic ingredients, and to receive that same level of satisfaction I speak of, you really do have to be in touch with some very specific creative decisions that went into making Tools of Destruction. Destroying crates and collecting massive amounts of loot is not the path of fun for a number of gamers; navigating gaping chasms and oscillating laser beams and jumping and gliding around moving platforms doesn't get the heart racing for everyone. And to connect to the game's blithe humor does take a softer spirit that is willing to look away from the typical hardened shooter that crowds the market. If this is the package you were shopping for and you end up walking away disappointed, well... I'm sorry for your hardened heart.

Remember how much fun it was simply moving Mario around in Mario 64, triple jumping into trees and guiding the delightfully drawn plumber around for no other reason than to feel his movement colliding with the world? The very best games, I believe, communicate an effortless and pleasurable sense of control—not one that you learn to guide, but are guided by. Tools of Destruction has a flow and smoothness to the world that starts with its feel of character and naturally pours into everything else. Even the transition from the cinematic to the core of the gameplay has a quality of synergy that is often missed in even the best of games.

Of all its terrific accomplishments—the technical prowess is extraordinary—Tools of Destruction probably won't be centered out so much for the strength of its storytelling, which is really too bad. Forget all the overwrought, downright brain-dead dialogue that continues to mark our games and really pay attention to the pleasures here of snappy, colorful dialogue with a heart. There's a moment, toward the end of the game, when Ratchet and Clank are reunited, that captures the insecure beauty of friendship and unspoken love. It's subtle and unexpected, the kind of development that just doesn't happen in games.

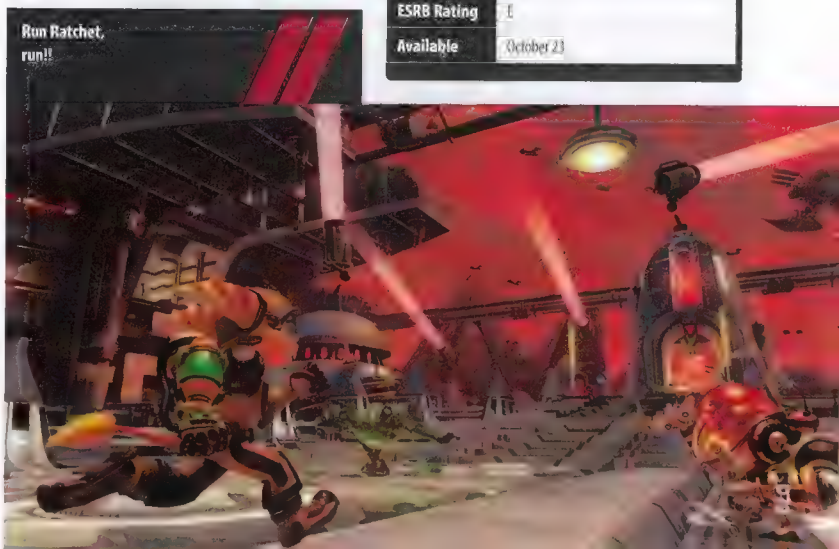
Look closer, start to sink into the experience, and you'll see a presence in Tools of Destruction that is perhaps equally foreign. The gameplay is so good, so refined, so pure and fun, and yet you cannot ignore how much the presentation makes this game a real triumph. It struck me how convincing and intricate certain aspects really are only after watching a friend play; walking up to the wonderfully animated creatures in the game is like pulling your favorite animated character out of a movie and finally being able to interact with them.

A lot of games, even the better ones, fail to provide bold contrast and any particular invention in level design. Tools of Destruction isn't necessarily bursting free from this hold, and anyone familiar with the series will feel some common threads, but the times it does feel excitingly original are show-stoppers. I love the inside of the space station, where the walls are various 3D representations of remarkable landscapes. The hugely entertaining space battles, which nicely alter the game's pacing, climax in a spectacular flight around a menacing sun, its solar flares exploding off the surface.

And pirates are in here too. I guess pirates aren't the most groundbreaking addition to a video game, but they've surely never looked this good, and I don't believe I've ever danced with pirates to gain access to a locked door. That may sound a little questionable, and I certainly had no intention of liking the groovatron and its dance-inducing hypnotic effects, or the insistence of Insomniac to integrate the Sixaxis throughout the adventure. But here again it all works within the context of the rest of Tools of Destruction, and that's about as close to true perfection as games are gonna get right now.

Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction score **10**

+	Looks amazing, feels great, tons of variety, big character
–	It's familiar, but that's OK for now...
System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Insomniac
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	E
Available	October 23



Soulcalibur Legends

A Wii bit of Soulcalibur

Before embarking on Soulcalibur legends one must ask the question: why would the powers that be at Namco Bandai decide to squeeze this beloved series—Ivy's animated naughty bits and all—into the kid-friendly Wii? The answer is of course simple. Soulcalibur is about a sword and the Wiimote...it's just like a sword! I'm surprised it doesn't come with a plastic sword attachment. I know that sounds coarse but, while the game does have merit, I can't help but imagine what this awesome concept might look and play like on 360 or PS3. But it's on Wii and so, on with the show.

Legends' closest match is 3D Castlevania's room-to-room, river-to-dell-area clearing, fighting throngs of enemies in order to dispel the barrier that keeps you from running through the level unscathed to face each boss. In between pillars fall, traps spring and inane puzzles lay in wait—devices to keep you in the game's low-tech strongholds for as long as humanly possible—but the bulk of the game is spent on swordplay. Low on health or spirit energy? Conveniently placed barrels and pottery hold all the elixir you'll ever need. The crux of the gameplay otherwise, no matter which character you select, consists of thrusting and slashing the Wiimote like a sword, which translates to waving it around like you're conducting an invisible orchestra and whatever comes out, comes out. It's not terribly accurate, but no matter, waving it about seems to get the job done just fine. You block, parry, dodge and use your Spirit Break (special move) with the Nunchuk; jump with B, and lock onto and off of assailants by simply pressing A (a good system actually). Now off you go to hack 'n' slash your brains out for the good of the empire. In between levels the story plays out via layered hand-drawn, flash animated dioramas and traditional text-driven cinemas using static hand-drawn characters. For a series known for its sweeping CGI cinemas I'm not sure how this will go over with fans, but for what it's worth, it's nicely done.

Where the game excels (there's good news too) is in the character models, where ALL the polygons go; the levels are terribly drab. Both heroes and enemies, especially the game's bosses, look amazing for being on Wii, and the

boss fighting almost makes up for the pedestrian state of the level design… almost. The only place you're really forced to think—the bosses do put up a good fight. The roster is another reason to forge ahead: Siegfried meets up with Ivy, Mitsurugi, Sophita, Taki, Astaroth and Lloyd—yours to select at the outset of each new level.

At the end of the day I'm not sure how Soulcalibur legends will fare. It's not a kids' series (I imagine that most of its fan base moved to 360 or PS3, although, because of the price everyone seems to have a Wii) but our resident kid testers loved the game. Standing in front of the screen and basically playing pretend warrior rendered great success. I had to take down some of the tougher bosses, but it's fairly easy to clear levels hacking and slashing like a Wii-warrior possessed. Of course, they didn't seem to mind that none of the characters have walking animation—they only and always run; what a shame—and fast forwarded the story while staring at the ceiling, but really got into physicality of it all. I can find no reason, other than Ivy's boobs, for the T rating, so, maybe this one will catch on with kids.

There's certainly potential here, albeit squandered (in my opinion) on the Wii where like so many of its games, the hook—waving the Wiimote—is more curse than cool.

Soulcalibur Legends score 7.0

\+ Beautiful character models, intuitive controls, challenging bosses, great characters from the series

\- No walking animation, inaccurate swordplay, pedestrian level design, drab backgrounds

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Namco Bandai Games
Publisher	Namco Bandai Games
Online/Multi	1-2 player (co-op, competition, versus)
Available	November 13
ESRB Rating	T

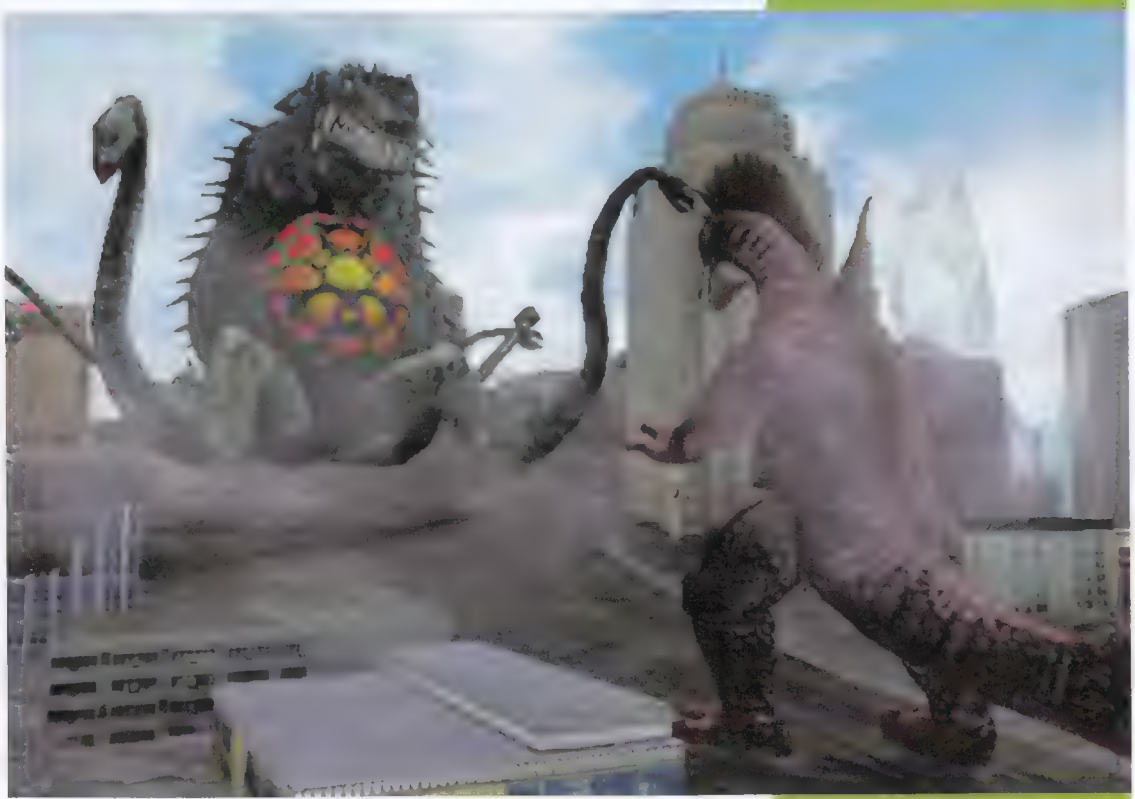
"Legends' closest match is 3D Castlevania's room-to-room, river-to-dell-area clearing..."

Godzilla UNLEASHED

Three down, next-gen to go...

words Dave Halverson

The recent Vortaak invasion (apparently this used car of a planet is still desirable to alien factions) has meteorites raining down on the globe, forming anomalous crystals that act like giant-monster catnip. The containment complex on Monster Island is kaput, and all four factions of the world's warring monsters are on the rampage. Acting as the foundation for the game's Story mode, the crystal formations exhibit different properties in different regions causing an outbreak of monster invasions the likes that the world has never seen. Nearly every monster (and then some) is accounted for, including Varan from the end sequence of Destroy All Monsters and two new monsters designed specifically for Unleashed—Krystalak and Obsidius. My favorite monster Hedorah, however, remains nowhere to be found. You'd think that with the stink over global warming, Hedorah would be the first on the list (it's a product of our polluting ways), but apparently Pipeworks has some anti-Hedorah law. That's three games and still nada... I keep telling myself that its ultra-polluted proportions probably couldn't be re-created on the Wii, which makes sense considering that he's a walking pile of goo. If he doesn't make the next-gen Godzilla though, I intend to launch an investigation. The Vortaak's various crystals bring about a string of natural disasters requiring the EDF to dispatch its monsters to locations around the globe where they (you) must destroy the crystals while fending off any monsters in the vicinity drawn to the crystals. There are three key aspects to the story mode: it's a huge plus when there's no one around to pummel in Brawl; it's the perfect training ground to acclimate oneself to an altogether peculiar control scheme, and it acts as a means for mastering each new monster as you begin to unwrap the massive assemblage. You can play through using any of the monster factions: Godzilla, Anguirus, Mothra, Baragon, Fire Rodan, King Caesar, or Varan for the Earth Defenders; Jet Jaguar, Moguera, Kiryu, Mecha King Ghidorah, or Mecha Godzilla 2 for the GDF; Titanosaurus, Biollante, Destoroyah, Space Godzilla, Krystalak, Megaguirus and Obsidius for the Mutants; or Orga, Megalon, Gigan, King Ghidorah and Mecha Godzilla for the Aliens. Throw in Godzilla 1954 and '90s and that's 26 characters for me and you. Story mode also introduces all of the game's environments, which range from snow covered to lava filled to metropolitan. The snow and lava are especially impressive as is the game's water, but this is the Wii and Pipeworks knows to focus on the monster models, so don't expect rush-hour traffic, realistic buildings or much in the way of demolition effects. There's enough here to get by, in relatively small areas. The important thing is the monsters and you



can definitely tell that they've done this twice already. The models are gorgeous given the limited tech on hand—pseudo normal-mapped and as awe-inspiring as ever. Unleashed is everything you could hope for from the Wii and more, complete with the usual am-I-guiding-a-jet airplane-to-the-hangar-or-playing-a-video-game control. I have absolutely no problem with people who fancy playing a fighting game by performing various gestures, I just wish that developers would take into account those of us who don't. The controller port on the side is there for a reason. Moves are performed via the A or B button or a combination of both while swiping or flicking for various context-sensitive moves. Yeah; context sensitive… the game has some cool AI even though it always seems (to me at least) like it's ignoring what I'm trying to do. The monsters just don't react with enough precision; it's somewhat a crap shoot as to what will come out even though you're performing the same motion. Then there's dashing… Hold down the tiny C button on the Nunchuk and shake it? Really? To run? That's almost as bad as holding down both Z and C to charge your special attack or flicking it up to jump. I have to flick my left wrist to jump? Nothing could be more extraneous. Unleashed just feels awkward, even though I always win… Using Anguirus or Megaguirus I can literally pin and defeat any character by flicking up while pressing A and B over and over. Over time, you get used to the controls (and okay, once in awhile I do get dead), but that doesn't

"Hold down the tiny C button on the Nunchuk and shake it? Really? To run?"

make them good. Like most games on the Wii, Unleashed would be better off on a pad. Heck, it'd be better off on 360 and PS3. As good a Wii fighter this is, it still looks comparable to the Save the Earth on Xbox; in fact, that game looks better in many respects and the "cinemas" in Unleashed look like something I scribbled on my notebook in Jr. High. Atari really needs to graduate the series after this. Maybe the plan is to spend the piles of cash this one will make on a next-gen version. Still: warts and all, this is among the best fighters for the system.

Godzilla Unleashed score 8.0

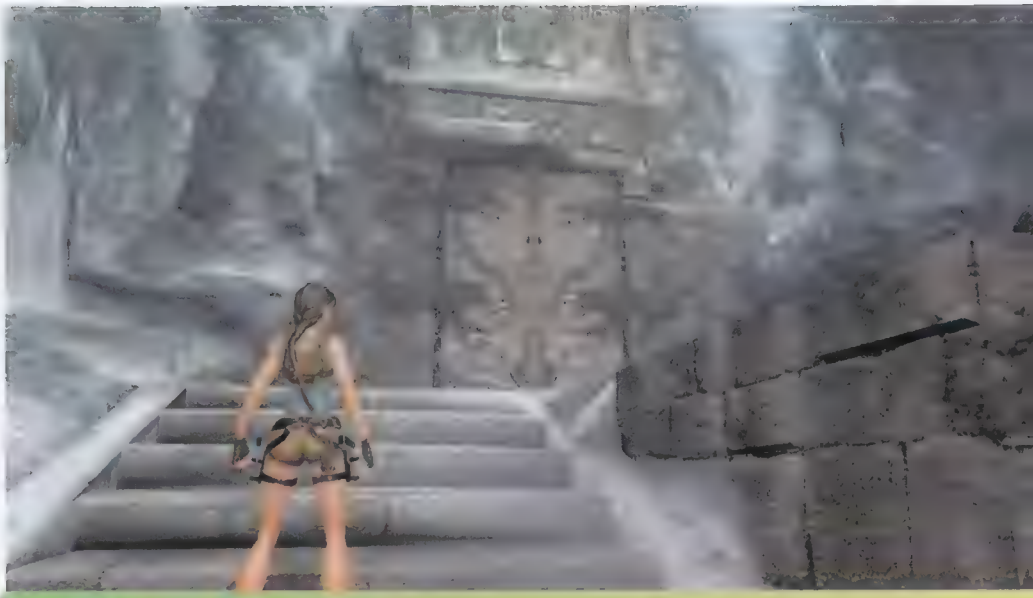
\+ 26 skillfully articulated monsters, vast replay value, up to 4-player co-op, custom, and story modes

\- Imprecise control scheme, smallish venues, low-tech environs, horrible cinemas

System(s)	PS2, Wii (reviewed)
Developer	Pipeworks
Publisher	Atari
Online/Multi	1-4 player
ESRB Rating	E 10+
Available	Nov. 20

Tomb Raider: ANNIVERSARY

She's still one of a kind



Xbox 360

words Brady Fiechter

being exposed to Tomb Raider: Anniversary yet again on Xbox 360 and Wii further reinforces my admiration for a series I fell in love with in 1996. There's still something about Lara's spirit of adventure and wonderment that isn't quite the same in other games that have followed. Crystal Dynamics has an intimate understanding of what fired the soul of the original and best in the series, and they do everything right to address a classic without compromising the purity of the experience. This really is a special game for the truest fans.

Anniversary is certainly an old-school adventure in some important and perceivably flawed ways. I've played this game so many times now, I really can't ignore how ancient some of its conventions might play today. Need a cog for that gear? It's probably magically waiting on the ledge above you. Can't get through the locked door? Certainly there's a key on the path ahead; all you have to do is pull the lever and open the way. The lock-on action is also fairly rudimentary despite the solid addition of an adrenaline shot, but if it was up to me, the game would be even stronger if Lara possessed nothing but her climbing gear.

It is the exploration, the sight of an opening far away that takes patience and long travel to ascend that excites the imagination. It is a world of atmosphere and mystery, and you get to involvingly touch its many angles to build passage through the intricate, sprawling quarters. Maybe you're ultimately out for that key, but the journey to open the box is a spectacular one.

There are many more technically sophisticated games on Xbox 360, yet Tomb Raider: Anniversary excels with its painterly quality and pleasingly stylized presentation. I had to kind of chuckle when I first saw the character models running on the next-gen hardware, but initial reaction aside, I really started to appreciate how well Anniversary grasps the most important artistic strokes. And above all, Lara controls so well and looks great running through her many elegant animations that bind her to the acrobatic demands of the world.

As for that Wii version, look: there's no reason to touch it if you have access to a 360 or have played the PS2 version. But it looks as good as the best games the system has to offer and sprinkles in motion-sensor interaction without weighing down the core of the game, capably waiting to entertain anyone who will be playing Anniversary for the first time. I still don't care for the Wiimote aiming mechanism and camera manipulation; the action here was designed for lock-on and doesn't quite gel. But I'm also not the audience this game is aimed at, and if you are that audience, welcome to a piece of gaming history.

On Wii, you literally give Lara a hand.

It may be a port but it's still a joy to behold on 360.

Tomb Raider: Anniversary — score 8.5

Always good to have Tomb Raider in high res and widescreen. It's a classic game redesigned to excel in a modern gaming world

There are certainly dated elements; have to appreciate the Wii controls to get the most out of that version

System(s)	Wii, 360
Developer	Crystal Dynamics
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	November

"...Tomb Raider: Anniversary excels with its painterly quality and pleasingly stylized presentation."

bloated wrestling commentator Jim "J.R." Ross is pontificating. "If I live to be 100," he says, "I'll never understand why they leave so many damn weapons under the ring."

Under the ring, there is so much junk you could arm your own gang—baseball bats with barbed wire wrapped around them, folding metal chairs, bamboo rods, sledgehammers, and pushbrooms. Around the ringside area, wrestlers can yank crutches from crippled members of the crowd and use it to pummel their opponents, or take the timekeeper's bell and use it to chime out their displeasure with the opposition, by which it is meant knock them insensate with it.

The point being, WWE Smackdown vs. Raw gives players a lot of junk to work with.

Unfortunately, it also gives players a lot of junk to deal with. This is the second iteration of the Smackdown vs. Raw series to make it to next-generation platforms, and its blemishes are becoming more apparent.

It was easy to forgive the previous iteration's flaws because it presented a novel control scheme that gave players the freedom to creatively execute certain moves, choosing how long they would hold an opponent inverted for a suplex or allowing them to repeatedly slam a foe's head into the padded turnbuckle. This scheme was a step forward for wrestling games and, coupled with things such as environmental hotspots (pieces of the scenery players could use to perform special moves), truly made WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007 a formidable contender.

Now, however, THQ has sought to further refine its gameplay with individual fighting styles for wrestlers. Wrestlers are classified as brawlers, showmen, high-fliers, technical specialists, powerhouses, etc., and each style has certain special moves its wrestlers can perform. This is, ostensibly, a good thing; differentiation between the wrestlers is genuinely appreciated. Yet the feature doesn't hold up throughout. Some of the special moves are either preposterous (evil wrestlers can use the referee as sort of a guided missile to knock down their opponents—without getting disqualified for the tactic) or genuinely tacked on (a superpowered escape from a pin? Come on.).

As a result, this year's big feature won't save the game.

Players can expect some decent load times because this title doesn't allow players the option to jump directly into matches. Instead, each competitor in the match is given an extended introductory sequence followed by an accompanying load screen. It's possible to skip an introduction once it's begun, but players will have time to make and eat a sandwich in the time it takes for everyone in a tag-team fight to be introduced.

More criticism can be levied directly at the gameplay. The game requires you to hammer on the gameplay buttons to make their wrestler rise from the canvas. This is tedium in action, especially in light that a wrestler will sometimes stay down as many as 15-20 seconds while the buttons are mashed. Tag-team matches, or any gimmick fights requiring special tactics, are sometimes intolerable; it's almost too much repeated effort, say, to dump a half-dead chump in a coffin, or climb a ladder 10 times to retrieve something from the rafters.

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2008

score: 7.5

\+ New fighting styles system differentiates wrestlers; lots of match types

– Problematic loads; certain match types aren't fun

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360 (reviewed)
Developer	Yuke's
Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	1-4
Available	October
ESRB Rating	T

"The handling and physics, damage accumulation and detail are all highly polished and the car models beam with next-gen wax-on."

Need for Speed Pro Street

words Dave Halverson

Once upon a time EA discovered that millions of people got off on virtual police chases, especially when you could whack the fuzz and send 'em tumbling into oncoming traffic…all in good fun of course. The game was called Road Rash, and it ruled the 16-bit streets before making its mark as the premier 3DO racer at the dawn of 3D, and finally one last stand on the Sega Saturn and PlayStation. A PS2 version ironically entitled Road Rash: Next Generation was eventually cancelled, but it wasn't long before EA's replacement killer, Need for Speed, burst onto the scene with more cops and all new environmental hazards to their health. Up until now the series has stayed true to the formula—making its next-generation debut with the amazing Need for Speed Most Wanted, the best game in the series thus far, followed closely by Carbon, the sequel that broke the proverbial camel's back.

Just as they did with Road Rash way back when, EA took a long look at the Need for Speed franchise and decided that it was time for a change, but this time, rather than dumping the series they've opted to switch gears, turning it into a tuner-car circuit racer with an emphasis on simulation elements—buying, tricking out, and repairing cars in conjunction with large-scale circuits dotted with a multitude of venues, although how greasy you get is entirely up to you. Rather than ram the performance elements down our throats, you can select a new blueprint and let your inner gear head shop or opt for quick upgrades and get back to the track where the game delivers with flying colors. This isn't the direction I think the series should go after such an impressive next-gen debut, but if this is an in-betweener to try something new...why not? After Most Wanted I'd really like to see a thoroughbred next-gen open-world version (so far every NFS has been designed cross-platform) before they retire the series though.

That said, Pro Street definitely delivers the tuner-car goods. The handling and physics, damage accumulation, and detail are all highly polished and the car models beam with next-gen wax-on. Course designs and performance characteristics are also right on the money. The only thing I don't like here is the MC—God I miss Brooke Burke; this guy is a major tool—and the interface that looks like Rob Cohen tossed his cookies on the tarmac. What really matters is on the pavement though, and Pro Street offers a genuine feeling of satisfaction when you cross the line first—a gear head to be reckoned with, especially when you're engaged in social play where others are forced to extol your mad skills.

I miss the old Need for Speed, but if a tuner-car fantasy complete with chicks you could never get in real life sounds like a diversion worth taking...burn that rubber.

Need for Speed Pro Street score **8.0**

+	Great handling, graphics and customization
–	New direction may not be for everybody

System(s)	Xbox 360 (reviewed) PS3, PS2, Wii
Developer	EA Games
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	Nov. 13

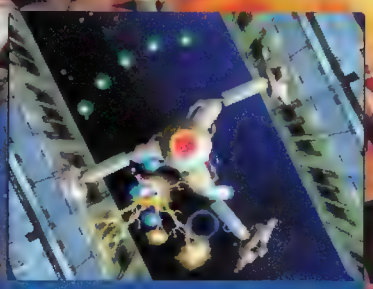
Warning: [illegible] We cannot be held responsible if performance varies on PS2 and Wii (which it surely will).

Nanostray 2

Interstellar dot dodging

Dave Halverson

There have been precious few stars in the lunar skies since the space shooter faded into obscurity. In space no one can here you become shooter. But it hasn't stopped Shin'en from doing what they do best. One of a handful of Japanese developers dedicated to the shooter market, they're the only ones that have managed to push their agenda stateside by creating the premier handheld shooters for the world's number one selling gaming app— the wonderful Nintendo DS. If you thought Nanostray was impressive you haven't seen anything yet. Like all great space shooters N2 gets it all right: three-way selectable firing à la R-Type and Gradius—check; multiple modes of secondary fire via a gauge filled by defeating enemies and rolling over power-ups—check; filtered sexy female voice onboard—check; massive rendered end bosses that spray out a kaleidoscope of brightly colored dots to dodge—check. It's all here, and then some... Unlike the iso-3D stages found in Nanostray, N2 features Gradius-inspired 2D, iso-3D, and killer top-down action spread over a diverse solar system. Enemy ships and drones are highly detailed, the backgrounds filled with animated constructs and the music will take you back to those carefree afternoons of Darius, Gynoug,



Thunder Force, Gradius, R-Type, etc., etc.

One of the reasons that shooters fell from grace being longevity, Shin'en has seen to you getting your money's worth too, by attaching a series of challenges that unlock the game's ultra-cool Simulators. Presented in groups of eight, challenges include Point, Collection, Survival, and Destruction rounds. N2 also features single- and multi-card two-player co-op options and an Arcade mode where any stages you've cleared in Adventure mode await your reentry. The most mind-blowing aspect of N2 though has to be its graphics, which either rival or surpass anything on the Wii; no shit. The game is simply stunning to behold, and (almost forgot) also features the easy, normal, or hard configuration of old. It's all here. Do not under any circumstances miss it.

Nanostray 2	
System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Shin'en
Publisher	Majesco
Online/Multi	2-player co-op
Available	January

Art: Ryu Moto

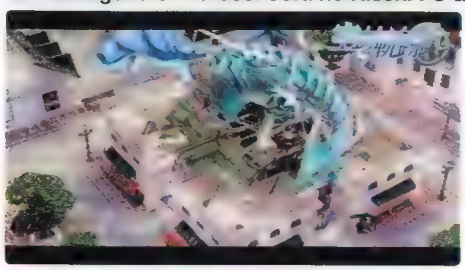
Best-of

compiled by

play Top 5 PSP — Japan Only

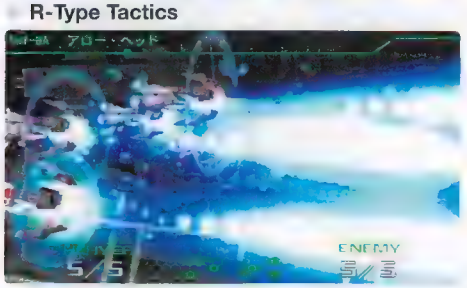
Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

The Legend of Heroes: Sora no Kiseki FC & SC



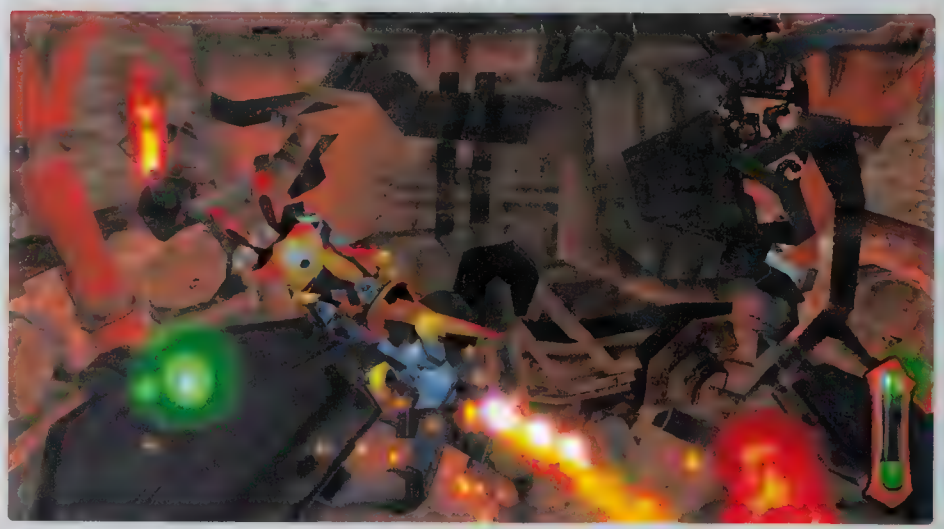
Wild Arms XF

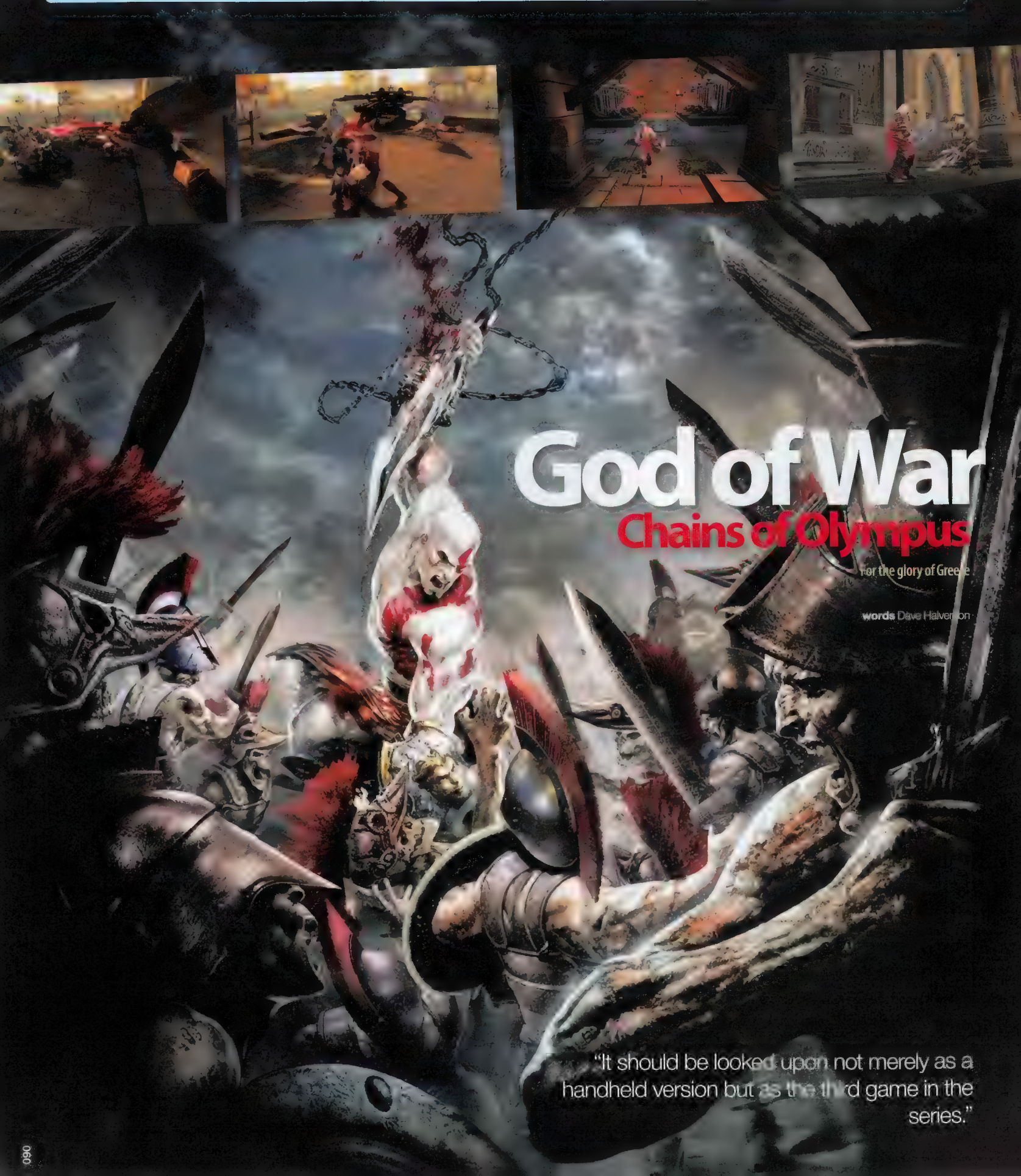
R-Type Tactics



Ridge Racers 2

play Top 20 PSP — US





God of War
Chains of Olympus

for the glory of Greece

words Dave Halverson

"It should be looked upon not merely as a handheld version but as the third game in the series."

God of War: Chains of Olympus deserves it place at the table. It should be looked upon not merely as a handheld version but as the third game in the series. It's actually a prologue to the first game—Kratos' journey during his ten years of servitude to the Gods of Olympus. Chains offers up everything a true sequel should—more of the same along with a few aspects to define it as a standalone game. Aside from smaller overall set pieces to adapt to mobile gameplay (like you'll be able to put it down), exploration, puzzle solving, and new combat moves will help set this game apart, just as God of War 2 stood on its own two bloody feet. And don't you even think about playing without quality audio stuffed into your ears. The soundtrack is utterly phenomenal.

Year after year, Sony create the types of games that gamers want to play; they don't bend to the will of any trends—at least not at our expense—and they strive to be ever the best. If you call yourself a gamer and you don't support Sony, may Kratos' chains visit you in your sleep.

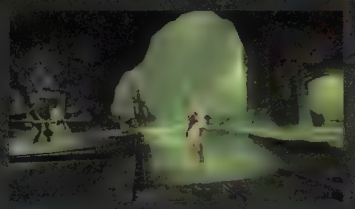
God of War: Chains of Olympus

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Ready at Dawn
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	NA
Available	March 2008

When it comes to first-party apps, which, when you get right down to it are the key to any dynasty, SCEA is one shrewd global super corporation. With Insomniac, Naughty Dog, Sucker Punch, and their Santa Monica Studio they lorded over the PS2 with godlike supremacy producing franchise after franchise, hit after hit. I like to think that Ready at Dawn Studios is the beginning of a similar first-party effort for the PSP. Just as Sony's console cabal did for the PS2 and are now doing for PS3, Ready at Dawn are able to bend the PSP to their will, making it do things nobody knew it could. Anyone who's been through Daxter knows that this is yet another super studio, another ace in Sony's hand.

Even so, the prospect of adapting God of War to the small screen had to be a somewhat daunting proposition. The game lives by its enormity: sweeping vistas, gigantic mythological creatures, halls of reflective marble and stone, and fierce ultra-complex melee combat. How by the sweet breath of Aphrodite does anyone shoe horn all of that into a PSP?

Playing the demo it takes all of one second to realize that they've pulled it off. As the camera sweeps into place around Kratos you're sure that it must be the beginning of the game's opening cinema, until it locks in place behind him, revealing what else? A massive vista! This is the game? With the ship-laden shoreline of Greece stretched out before Kratos you begin his assault, and everything is as it should be. The Kratos in-game model is superb and the melee action as fierce and liberating as ever. Dropping down into the dwelling underfoot, after slaying a dozen or so mere mortals…what's this? Ah…giant mythological creature… oh hey, what's that!? Giant creature eating giant mythological creature! Let the mini-game begin! What I wouldn't give for an extra second of button prompt!



Oh my God of War! This is PSP?

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-4
Developer	Intelligent Systems	**Available**	January 208
Publisher	Nintendo	**ESRB Rating**	TBA

gloominess has come to the Advance Wars series. The turn-based war strategy games had primarily concerned themselves with goofy heroes battling over-the-top bad guys in a series of skirmishes that, certainly, belied the consequences and seriousness of armed conflict.

With Advance Wars: Days of Ruin, the cartoon characters are sent on vacation. The lighthearted tone has been dismissed out of hand. Now, the game is genuinely dark. It allows players entrance into a world that's been shattered by repeated meteor strikes. Fans of the series may not recognize this new game as a Wars title. The perspective and aesthetic shift is that severe.

There will be new units to command. A duster plane can assault other planes as well as ground-based targets such as tanks and boats. A flare vehicle can be used to attack ground-based targets, but its specialty is illuminating areas of the gameplay map obscured by the fog of war. Motorbikes, which serve as fast-moving infantry, can be used to race to enemy bases and quickly take them over. Online features have been suitably augmented, too, with players now able to compete against players worldwide and use voice chat during games. Further, user-created maps can be uploaded, downloaded, and rated. **Greg Orlando**

Contra 4

score

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-2 players
Developer	Wayforward	**Available**	November 13
Publisher	Konami	**ESRB Rating**	T

It's the only way to fly!

the best parts of this job are far and away when you really reach someone (writing about a game no less), and the connection we enjoy with the development community. It's not as close as it once was—a PR stronghold now lies between us (sometimes for better and sometimes for worse)—but it's still the glue that holds this whole show together. When I saw that Wayforward, a US developer, had landed Contra 4 duty, it was another unspoken victory. Way back when, reviewing Scorpion King for the GBA I sensed that they were cut from the same cloth. The game felt like a Castlevania, and so, of course, I started up a relationship. Turns out I was right. These guys ate, drank, and slept 2D just as we did as kids. Especially all things Japanese. Unlike when Appaloosa got the nod to do the 3D Contra for PlayStation, in which a national day of mourning was called, this is one of those rare instances where a US studio can actually improve upon a classic Japanese formula. It's rare, but it does exist. I can imagine what it must have been like when they got the go ahead. "We get to make an original 2D Contra!?...Where's the NES!!"

And have they ever. Of all the 8-bit games I'd hope to revisit on the NDS, Super-C would be near the top of the list. Even though I haven't worked those muscles in a decade or so, it's like riding a bicycle, right? Wrong! If this was a bicycle, I'd be dead. Wayforward really stick to the code: Five continues and it's lights out; no health gauge, and one-dot kills... It all came rushing back within minutes... Ah, that feeling of frustration and perseverance all at once; how I miss this...not! One-dot kills all around! Hey, wait I'm doing great... Jesus that upper screen is sweet but, hey—they're shooting at me! Contra was hard enough on one screen. Now they're raining down on me from way up there! Do I have to go back to that hell again? Aaahhhh!!!!

Fast forward another few minutes and I'm standing before the first boss, locked and loaded; spread gun and laser at the ready... Okay you bastard wall of death I know you're stinking pattern now! And down it went. I still got it! I'm a goddamn gaming Tyrannosaurus Rex! But I wasn't out of the woods... Like the Contra of old, memorizing the second level would take many passes, including a few trips back through the first level...and so on, and so on. We used to memorize complex level patterns, store them away and then access them in a millisecond like gaming machines. It's hard work that's only worth enduring because of the amazing work that Wayforward has done. This is 2D Contra on the juice, everything you loved about 2D Contra is taken to the next level: vertical platforming and scaling galore, massive bosses, and the grappling...such sweet grappling. Down to the trademark ping the gunfire makes hitting steel, Contra 4 is a thoroughbred effort. You want old school? You got it. This is where we come from; what we grew up on. Viva la future! Now if you'll excuse me I'm going to go beat Heavenly Sword on Hell Mode again...with one hand tied behind my back. **Dave Halverson**

Warhammer Online

words Mike Griffin

I recently paid a visit to EA Mythic headquarters for a Warhammer Online story in this year's edition of Girls of Gaming (coming soon), and I absorbed far too much information for just one tome. With several months to go before its proposed early '08 launch, WAR is looking great. Most importantly, after my encounters with many low level homeland quests, several higher level public quests and a handful of realm vs. realm battles, I decided I haven't had this much fun in a fantasy MMO game in years.

The 24 player careers (classes) are coming along wonderfully. I was shown the updated Chaos Marauder, a light melee fighter with a mutated offhand limb blessed by the dark gods. You can switch to various mutation modes for the arm, including a fantastic "Get over here!" style tentacle attack that launches out and pierces through the enemy chest, pulling them in. The Chaos Chosen and Empire Knight are what EA Mythic refers to as a "battlefield commanders." Optimally when one plays these mega tanks you blend powerful area-of-effect "auras" together, mixing several temporary effects in a very involving, well-timed rotation—sort of like the Bard class in EverQuest.

The Witch Elf represents the Dark Elf faction's spry rogue-like career. She's a stealthy vixen, preparing her blades with poisons and quaffing specialized elixirs before battle. As per the Warhammer lore, the Witch Elves have been blessed with eternal beauty by their dark god Khaine, and in the game they'll use their beguiling bouncing assets to distract foes and reduce aggro. I also played a wrench-wielding Dwarf Engineer through the early part of the dwarven homeland, sharing kegs of beer with my vertically-challenged companions as we emptied out Greenskin camps. Overall, the combat is very active, rewarding players for chaining together carefully slotted Tactics (think of them as load-outs) with high powered attacks and finishing moves.

Warhammer Online's Realm vs. Realm gameplay represents some of the best PvP objectives I've experienced in a MMO with some very clever battleground design. And this RvR gives the game a real sense of consequence. Factions can truly sack and own an entire city. We witnessed the extreme: the sacking of the Empire's capital city, Altdorf. After the Destruction side has fought through smaller cities and conquered many instanced battlegrounds, they reach this massive medieval-style city for a final victory. The conquered Altdorf lies in ruin; fires rage, buildings and walls are collapsed. Our sinister Black Orc took great pleasure in busting down doors, trashing furniture, pillaging safe boxes and setting more fires. Meanwhile, the forces of Order regroup at a newly-spawned refugee camp outside the city. Word gets out that Order is rallying: players have dropped what they're doing to join the reinforcements. Is this the part where you have to log-off and get some sleep? It's a world of constant battles, where your blade and sorcery actually makes a difference. It's PvP with playable, visible consequence.

My EA Mythic visit left me very hopeful for Warhammer Online's future. Once again I witnessed the glory that is the Tome of Knowledge: no MMO and few RPGs have ever featured a player journal or compendium this deep, well written and complex. Imagine a MMO world filled with hundreds of lore-fuelled Xbox Live-style achievements, with rewards like XP and new skills. I haven't talked about the PQ (Public Quests) I experienced, like the awesome avatar battle in the Temple of Tzeentch, but rest assured that these large cooperative quests will forever change the landscape of PvE. As a final note, I arrived just in time to see WAR's all new lighting system and it really compliments the game's stylized artwork. Next stop: beta immersion.

Warhammer Online	
System(s)	PC
Developer	EA Mythic
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	Persistent online
Available	2008

Dead Island

An endless summer for the undying

words Mike Griffin

Following the [illegible] of Juarez, Techland' [illegible] tackle first-person [illegible] Pacific paradise. Throw Far Cry, Condemned, and Island of the Living Dead into a blender, then sweeten it with a sprinkle of RPG; this is Dead Island, coming to PC and Xbox 360 in '08. We unearthed exclusive details in a chat with Techland Producer Adrian Ciszewski.

Dead Island	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Techland
Publisher	TBA
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	2008

"We consider Dead Island the first real First Person Melee game for a reason: an ultra-realistic combat system and innovative controls allow for a very precise hit location system."
Adrian Ciszewski, Producer

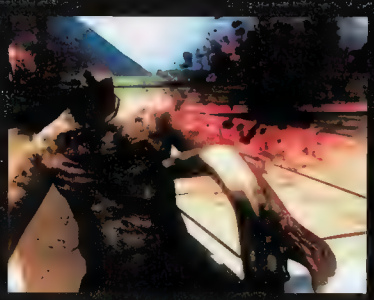
Interview

Adrian Ciszewski, Producer Dead Island

play: **First of all, nice job on the 360 version of Call of Juarez. The Chrome engine looks great on console. You've updated the engine again for Dead Island, a game being pitched as intelligent action horror steeped in heavy atmosphere. Will DI have the destructible physics recently demoed in Warhound (Techland's other project in development)?**

Adrian Ciszewski: We applied everything we could to make a stunning looking modern game. Destructible foliage physics have become a rule in games nowadays and we are always trying to compare to the highest standards and beyond. Not only will all our vegetation be destructible, but most elements of the environment as well. It will give the player options to make a lot of sophisticated traps for the enemies. The Chrome Engine has definitely changed since Call of Juarez; changes that are deeply technological. I assure you that the atmosphere on the island is going to be dark and thick.

It seems like this was once a prestigious luxury hotel and beach resort; you can see beneath the damage and ruin that the central buildings are quite large and modern. What year is it in Dead Island and how did this undead crisis come to paradise?



Quite literally hacking them to pieces.

Dead Island takes place in present times on an island set somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. There will be a lot of different environment settings—interiors and outdoors with challenging landscapes. We managed to design a huge, realistic looking tropical island with a road infrastructure, marinas, pool bars and so on. On the one side you have this beautiful island where you want to spend your holiday and on the other side it's a place full of brain-hungry zombies. We can't tell you how the island is overrun by zombies because we don't want to spoil the story.

Fair enough. What kind of situation does the player find himself in as the Dead Island experience begins?
The player will take on the role of a plane crash survivor. The main character wakes up somewhere on the island and finds that there is no plane wreck, and his wife is missing. After a while he learns that the island is overrun with loads of zombies. In the midst of this, he must save himself and his missing wife. On his quest he meets other survivors fighting for their lives. Initially his goals are pretty obvious but things will get much more complicated during his journey. That's how Dead Island begins. I can only assure you that the story is immersive and intriguing from the beginning till the very end.

We're starting to see that DI really celebrates armed melee combat; desperately hacking and mangling those rotten, deforming bastards. How is the player, this plane crash survivor, going to find weapons?
We consider Dead Island the first real First Person Melee game for a reason: an ultra-realistic combat system and innovative controls allow for a very precise hit location system—making the combat sensational yet realistic. Each interactive object may serve as a weapon. We want to express real life conditions in the game for each object, where you'd use the objects naturally. Being in such locations like a hotel kitchen or room, a shop for divers or a gas station, gives us an opportunity to find objects necessary to fight with the living dead. Every location will offer a range of weapon assortment. Weapons will gradually wear: for example wooden objects will finally crack and iron will bend which will reduce their effectiveness. Firearms are a rare phenomenon on the island and access to them will be limited due to a small amount of ammo. That is why the player has to constantly look for objects that can be used as effective weapons. That element brings all the fun when playing.

Don't tease us, Adrian. Let's hear some real game examples of the makeshift weaponry players will find and brandish against the masses...
It will be a long list, let me name just a few of them: meat cleavers, knives, frying pans, toasters, microwave ovens, chairs, lamps, planks, pipes, fire extinguishers, oars, spear guns, crowbars, hammers, screwdrivers and so on and so forth. The amount of carried equipment is determined by total weight. We definitely want to make this game as realistic as possible so the main character will have to choose wisely what to carry on his journey through the living dead nightmare.

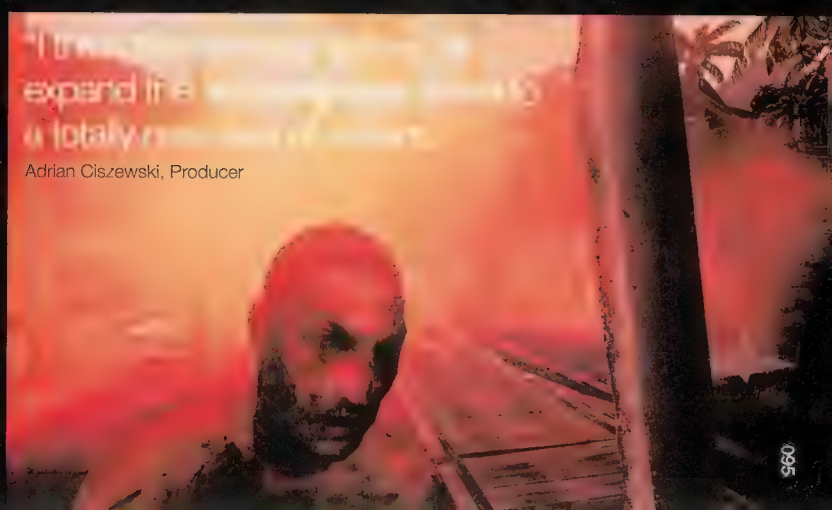
You say that firearms are a rare phenomenon on the island, but we noticed a large military-like bunker with soldiers and machine guns. Will players find shops or is this one of the NPC factions?
There are some military forces on the island but they're not always efficient against undead attacks. The area you noticed shows one of the civilian groups that have gathered weapons. It's very hard to get ammo: weapons are scattered across the area, sort of like an artifact on the island. To get it the player has to have a good relationship with different groups.

People love how zombies move and attack, and how they take damage. What sort of cool AI and damage effects are you planning? Looks like we'll see slicing, hammering, burning, impaling, electrocution...
The damage system is something that we are proud of. We managed to make exceptionally faithful visualization of injuries based on a multi-layer body model which shows skin, muscles and bones. Inflicted injuries are varied and depend on the weapon held by the player and the part of the body he hits. For example, if you fight with a crowbar your hits will damage all layers, with a machete you can cut thin but deep wounds, and if you fight with a club after a hit you will see true deformation of the opponent's body. It's combined with characters' physics, like if you shoot off a zombie's legs, he will crawl. There will also be lots of effective finishers. I think this damage feature will expand the survival horror genre to a totally new level of realism.

Can players expect different breeds of undead, like terrifying mutated zombies with freakish special abilities? How about big boss battles?
It's just like you said. There will be several kinds of zombies with different abilities. I'm sure that both Romero and 28 Days Later fans will be pleased. And there will be some spectacular boss fights; every battle will be different because every boss will have different strong and weak points to recognize.

Dead Island looks surprisingly open-ended and it seems to draw on Warhound's mission and NPC faction system. Will players receive missions while exploring the island on a whim, or will you have a deep, highly-scripted campaign?
It's actually more RPG-ish than Warhound. Dead Island is a nonlinear and multi-threaded game with lots of RPG elements. Players will have decisions to make, they will initiate contact and complete side quests through dialogue; it's up to the player where and when he wants to go. The open world of the island gives such opportunity. It is divided into large zones and you can access them all the time. So you have a totally free-roam game with accessible levels. The main plot will expand depending on player actions. Moral choices are a very important aspect of Dead Island. The player can determine NPC fates, making them strong allies or devout enemies. The game gives complete freedom of selecting side quests, so even if the player skipped some missions he can return and complete them anytime

Best of luck choosing a quality US publisher for Dead Island, and keep up the good work.
Thanks for the interview



Adrian Ciszewski, Producer

Universe at War: Earth Assault

score 7.5

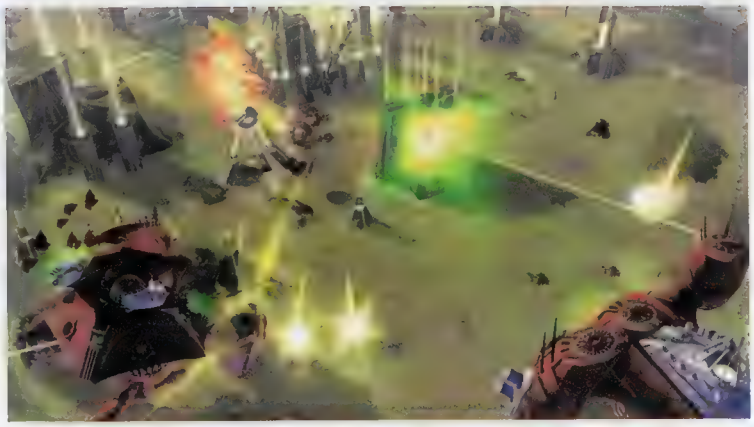
System(s)	PC	Multi	1-8p
Developer	Petroglyph	Available	December
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	T

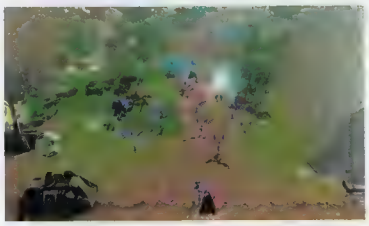
Sega and Petroglyph delayed Universe at War: Earth Assault mere weeks before its late October release, shifting the highly-anticipated real-time strategy title to an early December launch. Petroglyph has assimilated a massive amount of multiplayer beta feedback, while some of the critically important LIVE multiplayer and achievement functionality is finally ready for prime time. UaW is a detailed and imaginative strategy title from one of the most experienced developers in the genre.

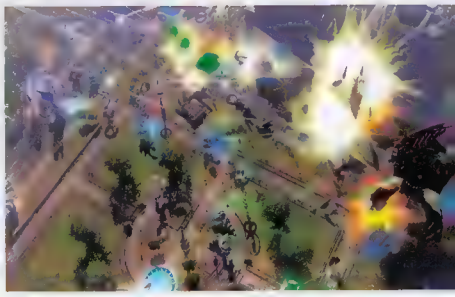
While many RTS titles put an emphasis on large scale field movement of bland units, Universe at War really celebrates its units' special abilities and the multitasked economy of fuelling those abilities. Basically each faction has architects, scouts, commandos, specialized infantry and hardcore tanks, in addition to a number of high powered Hero units.

The Hierarchy, Novus and Masari have very different and entertaining abilities. Petroglyph demonstrates some great imagination. The galaxy-razing Hierarchy have handy units like Defilers that can make mutant slaves out of biological civilians. One of its heroes, Kamal, can erect Force Walls that all but guarantee his protection. Consider the Flow Network of the Novus faction: these ultra-sophisticated robots can literally disseminate themselves into particle streams of data, and reform halfway across the battlefield if need be, wreaking Zerg-like havoc when working in large teams. My favorite Hero is probably Prince Zessus of the Masari, who can teleport himself and *any* nearby units (including volatile enemy units) to any spot on the map that his scouts have discovered. When he ports in with a handful of Sky Lords, the carnage is exquisite.

Universe at War continues Petroglyph's compelling unit research and build trees—last seen in their Star Wars RTS titles, and additional temporary abilities will unlock in multiplayer thanks to Windows LIVE in-game achievements and medals. The game's UI is slightly over-simplified (a compromise for console controls on the upcoming Xbox 360 version), yet it remains clear and accommodating. RTS fans would do well to investigate Universe at War. **Mike Griffin**







Three advanced alien factions fight for Earth.

Hellgate: London

score 8.0

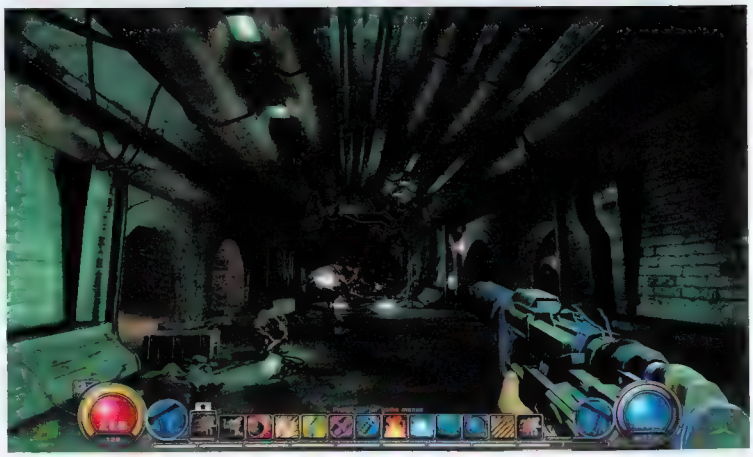
System(s)	PC	Multi	1-5p, Guilds, Duels
Developer	Flagship Studios	Available	November
Publisher	Namco Bandai/EA	ESRB Rating	M

I've settled on a firm point: Hellgate: London excels in a multiplayer environment, yet feels lonely and stripped-down as a single player game. Thankfully both modes are included, and Hellgate's multiplayer game mirrors the single player campaign pixel for pixel, quest for quest. And it's free to go online and play with the world on Flagship's secure servers.

Considering the great party gameplay, where difficulty scales up for two or more grouped players, where people can trade items, duel each other for fun, join guilds and participate in events, Hellgate's single player mode feels barren. Besides, the multi- and single-player game are exact twins, so you can always tackle the story on your own and simply enjoy the ambience of populated towns as you shop and gather missions. The game's interface and quest system are very MMORPG. Players coming to Hellgate for a single-player campaign experience may find the mission interface and in-engine story delivery mechanisms to be thin and uninspiring, while online gamers will recognize the UI is built for speed, ready for quick click-throughs by players taking their fourth or fifth character through the game for more carnage and treasure.

Boiled down to its gameplay, Hellgate: London delivers the action-RPG goods. I've played each class extensively and I take as much pleasure in barbecuing a room of zombies from afar as I do grinding through a sea of demons at point blank. The streamlined item enhancement and crafting system makes it very convenient to stay well-equipped through the 40 hour campaign, and you can always "farm" a boss for legendary items. The game's five Acts are well-tuned, ramping up in difficulty when appropriate, and the good-looking creatures have entertaining AI. Performance is surprisingly stable at peak image quality; although combat with truly massive herds can result in a fair bit of chug—especially from certain particle effects. The game's rumbling industrial music cues provide suitable menacing accompaniment.

Hellgate: London arrives as an addictive and highly replayable action RPG. This often intense experience will resonate strongest with online gamers, as the missions and in-engine story presentation lack the gusto of a good, dedicated offline single-player campaign. **Mike Griffin**



Alpha Prime

score 6.5

System(s)	PC	Multi	NA
Developer	Black Element/Idea Games	Available	November
Publisher	Meridian4	ESRB Rating	T

Meridian4 ordered surgical nips and tucks for the North American release of Alpha Prime, asking developer Black Element to make balance adjustments, add Vista compatibility, full screen anti-aliasing, and fix some of the broken dialogue. Have these porting efforts completely flipped the coin on a pretty average shooter? Not quite. However, between the game's competent action and new tweaks, Alpha Prime takes a small step into above average territory. Did I mention it goes for $19.95?

For a budget-priced title, Alpha Prime's production values are fairly impressive. The voice acting is largely poor, but the music and foley are perfectly serviceable. The environments (with settings maxed) demonstrate a surprising level of detail; most budget FPS titles don't have the time or resources to decorate with this much advanced mapping. The story, an interstellar sci-fi yarn about a super-precious mineral that corrupts all, is mostly forgettable.

At 20 bucks, Alpha Prime may be a decent stocking-stuffer for FPS junkies. Yes, it's very formulaic, drawing upon objectives, interaction, physics and AI routines you've experienced before in superior packages, but it's neither offensive nor unwieldy, and the pacing is brisk. **Mike Griffin**

Sam & Max: Ice Station Santa

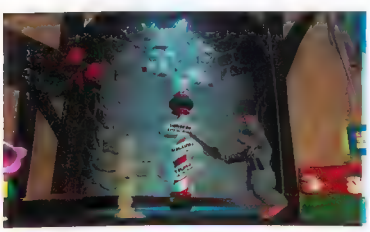
score 8.0

System(s)	PC	Multi	NA
Developer	Telltale Games	Available	November
Publisher	Telltale/GameTap	ESRB Rating	T

Ice Station Santa has officially kicked off the second season of Sam & Max with a wonderfully off-kilter holiday-themed episode. The gags begin with an extensive tongue-in-cheek homage to 1980s music lyrics, as delivered by a giant obsessive robot that is *way* too wound up. One of the robot's errant laser beams carves a hole in the detectives' office wall, and we see their wacky neighbor beating a confession from a poor, unseen sap. Yup, I thought, it's going to be another weird one. And the bait is taken.

As you travel back and forth between the detectives' neighborhood and Santa's Workshop in this episode, logic and twitch-based mini-games keep things light and fun. Telltale injects such a warm charm into all these absurd situations through a great cast of old and new characters (love the talking arcade). The splendid voice work doesn't hurt. You'll genuinely want to speak to every possible character because they're all slightly insane and some of Max's observations are priceless.

If you enjoyed the silly, cynical and delightful whimsy of past Sam & Max adventures, this episode will bring that smile back for another couple of hours… if you can scrounge up a measly $8.95. **Mike Griffin**



The Witcher

score 8.5

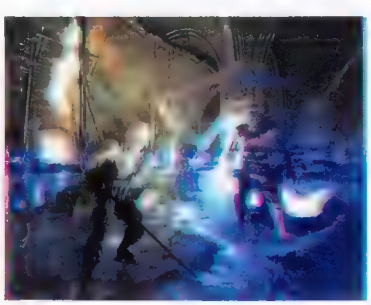
System(s)	PC	Multi	NA
Developer	CD Projekt Red	Available	October
Publisher	Atari	ESRB Rating	M

It's fairly easy to see The Witcher for what it is: a distinctly East European style of RPG whose healthy veins are pumping with BioWare's lifeblood. Sure, the 2007 edition of their Aurora engine has been vastly enhanced by developer CD Projekt, but its core DNA—that deep, dialog-filled role-playing and decision making—is stamped all over The Witcher's rather epic monster hunting experience, much to the game's benefit.

If your desires gravitate towards the Asian aesthetic of RPG design, CD Projekt's medieval fantasy world may live in a land far away from your preferences. The color palette, character design, and general atmosphere gravitate towards realistic hues, proportions and mood. It's mature, dark and gritty. If you have the hardware to accommodate the game's best visuals, you're in for superlative immersion in Andrzej Sapkowski's virtualized fiction.

What you need to keep in mind coming into The Witcher isn't the pleasant presentation; the gorgeous UI artwork, the painstakingly textured demons, or the fertile audio. Even the super-deep sword and magic skill trees shouldn't lead your temptation. Enter Geralt's world for the story and the role-playing, for about 45 hours of truly detailed, heartfelt and obsessive RPG design in a compelling fantasy narrative whose multiple endings hinge on your many choices. An excellent first effort from CD Projekt Red. **Mike Griffin**

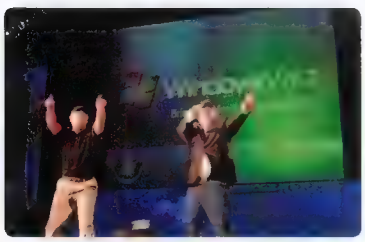
"…you're in for superlative immersion in Andrzej Sapkowski's virtualized fiction."



ask alienware

no. 017 // december 2007

q. Windows Vista has been making great strides in terms of patches and updates, and yet Microsoft has back-pedaled a little. I hear that more Windows XP service packs will be issued to give XP some Vista-like features. How is this going to affect the Vista gaming transition? Can people fearlessly buy a Vista-equipped PC now for gaming, or will XP continue to be valid for years to come? Terri, MD

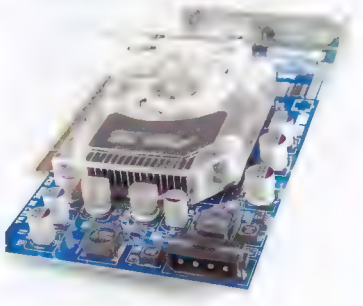


Alienware: Those service packs will not affect the transition to Windows Vista gaming PCs. For one thing, there will be no Windows XP gaming additions in any of the service packs. Plus, to get true DirectX 10 gaming, you will still need to purchase the Vista OS. As a result, a Vista gaming PC is definitely the best choice for gamers. Ultimately, even though XP is a good operating system, it is limited in features compared to Vista, which is an especially important consideration to keep in mind with major new game titles such as Crysis now available.

q. On a recent flight I was paging through Play and the fellow beside me commented on an Alienware ad. He said he was military and that his unit uses two Alienware laptops in the field. He said, "They're awesome. Throw anything at it, it works." OK, color me impressed by the military endorsement. What is it about your machines that make them so robust? Is it the parts and materials you select, or certain manufacturing standards? Josh, CT

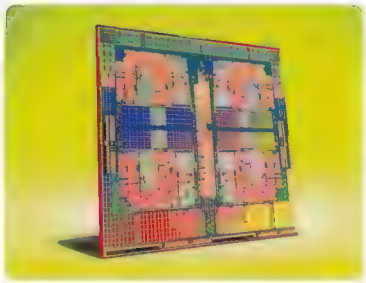
Alienware: Since Alienware systems are specifically geared for high performance and stability, they are a natural fit for the military. The U.S. Air Force, Army and Navy all use our systems in the field for advanced simulations, GIS mapping and other vital projects. The advantages that Alienware systems provide come from a well-executed plan of implementing the highest quality components and exhaustively engineering each system to perfection. That has proven to be a winning combination for the military and gamers alike.

q. A lot of console games use PhysX, so AGEIA must be making some money that way, but the PhysX hardware still hasn't become popular. I haven't ponied up for one yet. Now they're pitching hardware PhysX gameplay in two great looking first-person shooters: Unreal Tournament 3 and Warmonger. I love eye candy in FPS games. The physics card is looking tempting again. Do you guys at Alienware see a future for PhysX hardware? Danny, SC



Alienware: Yes, there is a future for PhysX hardware. It is a maturing technology that helps game developers offer games that deliver a more immersive realm of gameplay. Upgrading your system with a PhysX card enables processing cycles to be offloaded from your graphics unit and CPU, which will allow those components to operate more efficiently. Additionally, having this card will future-proof your system for upcoming PhysX-enabled games.

q. Why have CPU speeds stopped surging forward like they did between '99 and '04? It's like we're capped at 3.8 GHz now, and they just keeping adding more cores to the chips instead of increasing the speed. It all comes down to temperatures, right? What if there's a breakthrough in the type of material we put microchips on? Ken, MA



Alienware: Even though many of today's CPUs run at the same frequency as CPUs in the past, the core micro-architecture has vastly improved, which makes current processors faster. CPUs today also run much cooler than in the past due to die shrinkage, which enables lower thermal output, improved energy efficiency and higher overclocking potentials. CPUs are made with silicon, the second-most abundant element in the Earth's crust. Since

"The U.S. Air Force, Army and Navy all use our systems in the field..."

silicon can be manufactured from sand and clay, it is important when creating circuitry and processors because it keeps resources low and is an excellent electric conductor. this card will future-proof your system for upcoming PhysX-enabled games.

q. The trickiest element of overclocking seems to be the part where you begin to adjust power voltage for stuff on your motherboard, like the processor and RAM. I have thousands of dollars invested in these parts. Are they built to withstand a wide range of power adjustments or is it easy to blow a part during voltage tweaking in the BIOS? Francis, CA

Alienware: There are thermal monitors in the BIOS that you can use to regulate core voltages when overclocking, and they should automatically shut down if you reach thermal levels that can harm core components. The safest ways to have an overclocked system are to either buy from a manufacturer that warranties overclocking or use the CPU multiplier located in the BIOS to overclock.

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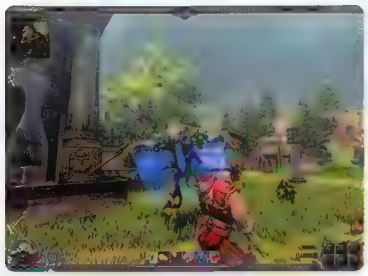
REAL COMPETITION

Savage 2 sharpens its claws for launch

Play recently had an opportunity to square off online against several developers from S2 Games, the shop behind the upcoming strategic shooter Savage 2: A Tortured Soul. Essentially, Savage 2 is a fantasy-themed multiplayer action romp with MMO-like character classes and magic attacks. Like recent Battlefield games, one player on each side takes on the role of commander, with access to RTS-like views and controls. In Savage 2, the commander will research and build supply outposts from a tactical view while players on his team tear across the map securing buildings, gold mines and sacrificial pits.

The online action in Savage 2 feels crisp and tight. Character bones are animated on the server instead of using a typical collision box, allowing for high accuracy hit detection on melee and ranged attacks. We played several units, ranging from the deft bow-wielding human Scout to the cunning beast Shaman. Each class has a handful of battle skills, ranging from the carnivorous rampage of Predators to the soothing healing auras of the human Chaplain. The trail of carnage is recorded on player and clan leaderboards. Savage 2 is currently beta testing and could be going live before year's end.



GameTap: tapping the hardcore

In an age of retro resurgence on console, where players anxiously await piecemeal weekly offerings of classic titles on their Xbox 360, Wii and PS3, people often overlook the incredible retro gaming catalogue available on PC and Mac via GameTap. The GameTap gold membership yields an outstanding selection of titles, but there are literally dozens of free to play games from a list bursting with awesome arcade and console classics.

On November 15th, GameTap introduced its 1000th game—Sid Meier's beloved Civilization IV. Civ IV joins a fairly awesome roster of Windows gems you can find on GameTap: stuff like Psychonauts, Deus Ex, Baldur's Gate 2, Thief, Silent Hill 2, Grandia 2, Beyond Good & Evil, Legacy of Kain, and Free Radical's underappreciated Second Sight, among many others.

More and more console players are flocking to GameTap. The Sega Genesis collection is unmatched, even boasting imports like Monster World 3 and Wonder Boy 6. The Neo Geo roster is incredibly comprehensive, stocking ten King of Fighters titles, seven Fatal Fury games, and all five Samurai Shodowns—among dozens of others. GameTap also has Saturn games like Panzer Dragoon, PD Zwei and Clockwork Knight, and favorites like Knuckles' Chaotix on 32X. The arcade selection may bring a tear to the eye of Capcom fans: we're talking arcade editions of Forgotten Worlds, Final Fight, Strider, Vampire Savior, and eight different Street Fighter games. Since every imaginable flavor of controller has a USB adapter these days, it's not uncommon to hear of GameTap players using 360 controllers for PC games, arcade sticks for the fighters, and SNES and Saturn pads for everything else 2D. GameTap also includes online multiplayer for most console and arcade titles.

Sam & Max Season Two: Ice Station Santa (reviewed this month) is now playing on GameTap, and early next year will see the arrival of American McGee's Unreal 3-powered Grimm, a twisted 24-part re-interpretation of the classic fairy tales. Turner's gaming destination is certainly earning some street cred of late.

"...dozens of free to play games from a list bursting with awesome arcade and console classics."

A goldmine for retro console gamers

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

Three years into the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII project, a game worthy of the name finally arrives

words Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe

With [illegible] million drawing mixed reviews and hinge on Cerberus drawing more [illegible] Square Enix's Compilation of Final Fantasy VII project has one last chance to redeem itself: Crisis Core -Final Fantasy VII- has sold over 700,000 copies in Japan and lead the PSP to an unprecedented surge in popularity, but its gameplay quirks have generated plenty of skeptical headlines in the west. Play Japan's Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe discuss.

Nick Des Barres: Crisis Core: Best PSP game ever, or best handheld game ever?

Casey Loe: Neither. Most moving and powerful video game story on any platform, ever? Possibly. A must-play for fans of FFVII? Absolutely. But as a *game*, I'm not impressed.

Nick: I can agree with your initial statement: Crisis Core is, very possibly, the most complete dramatic experience I've ever had with a video game. But I will argue strongly that the gameplay itself is also quite solid. I don't think it would be hard to argue the point that Crisis Core is in fact the *most* hardcore Final Fantasy game ever made, even if the difficult parts exist completely divorced of the storyline.

Casey: It does have a ton of super-challenging optional bonus missions, and I appreciate that. But the main quest is so pathetically easy that if you ever try to pursue those missions in the course of the story, you'll become so powerful that you could kiss goodbye to any semblance of challenge for the entire rest of the game.

So unless you want to sleepwalk through the entire main story, you'll have to refrain from doing them until the end. Personally, I have no desire to play through 300 basically identical sub-missions with no storylines. But for hardcore gamers who don't mind the repetition, they're certainly a great bonus, and they do give certain mechanics the chance to shine that they don't get in the main quest. But my complaints don't end there, mind you–Crisis Core also ruins its otherwise good battle system with the absurd DMW system, which breaks into battles constantly to unleash extremely time-consuming Limit Breaks and Summon Spells completely at random.

Nick: I wish I could retain the hardcore gaming stance you so admirably cling to, but the state of JRPGs over the last decade has completely broken my spirit to the point that I *expect* the main story to be a cakewalk. With budgets this high, I recognize the fact that epic games like Final Fantasy have to appeal to a lowest common denominator. That's why I applaud, and am satisfied with, the sheer amount of "traditional gamer" content incorporated into Crisis Core. There are literally 50 hours or so of optional missions liberally spread throughout the entire main quest–in terms of challenge, they feel like the "main game" to me. They may be almost entirely devoid of story, but I will argue against them being identical. Every single mission has a different map layout, and the last 50% always require extensive pre-planning. The only thing I can hold against them is the fact that they don't carry with them the satisfying punch of advancing the storyline. Before I get into DMW–"Digital Mind Wave", the core mechanic, tell me why you don't like it.

Casey: The DMW is a slot machine that spins constantly in the corner of the screen, dishing out little bonuses when you get two of a kind and whatnot. That much is fine. But when you're about to get three of a kind, which happens roughly every 10 to 20 seconds, the battle pauses. You then get to watch the reels spin for several seconds–thrilling stuff. Then, if they hit, you either level-up, use a summon spell, or get a random Limit Break (which look cool, but cannot be skipped). And since these occur *at random*, you will invariably get a screen-clearing Limit Break when the only surviving foe is already a hit away from death, or get a healing effect when you're at full health, and so on. Having no control over the game's most powerful abilities, and having to spend half of each battle watching something non-interactive...I find both inexcusable. I cringe every time I see that stupid slot machine pop up.

Oh, and as to writing off hardcore players during the main quest, there's something called a "difficulty select," which was invented *thirty years ago*. If you're going to get a staff of hundreds to work for years on a major franchise release, maybe you should hire one more guy to make a Hard Mode so that your game can be enjoyed by your *core audience*. I guess there's still a slim chance that they'll add one for the North American release, though.

> "Crisis Core is, very possibly, the most complete dramatic experience I've ever had with a video game."

Nick: That's a fair argument. I can understand why some people might not like DMW. It did take me quite a bit of time to "let go and let God", as it were. When I came to accept the system, however, I found that I truly enjoyed it. Too often in RPGs one finds themselves hoarding the most powerful attacks and spells and so forth, ending up with a useless stock of them at the end of the game. Having them be out of your control was oddly freeing, and allowed me to concentrate on the central aspects of the otherwise unassailable battle system. The DMW may be highly unusual, but it's a radical concept and I appreciate director Hajime Tabata and creative producer Tetsuya Nomura's pushing for it to be included in the game. The most fascinating aspect of the system was its cutting to significant "flashbacks" from main character Zack's memories during battle, and, for me, the *masterful* way it was incorporated into the playable endgame makes up for all of its failings.

Casey: That is true–the characters on the DMW reels represent Zack's scattered memories, and as he's about to get three-of-a-kind, he often flashes back to off-screen events involving that character, and suddenly you're watching an event scene in the middle of combat. In another game, I would probably find this obnoxious, but like every morsel of characterization in Crisis Core, they're exceptionally well done. And that's the reason I'm willing to overlook all of Crisis Core's flaws. While not everything in the game's story works–the whole dangers-of-genetic-engineering plot is painfully tired at this point–the things that do set a new high-water mark for storytelling in games. Zack has been transformed from an obscure piece of mythology to my favorite Final Fantasy hero ever, and young Aerith and new character Cissnei are among my favorite heroines. Crisis Core even makes me love Cloud, who I never liked before. This game has hours of event scenes, and every one of them is sharply written, immaculately staged, and beautifully designed. The story is funny, it's touching, and ultimately, it is heart-shatteringly tragic.

Nick: Finally something we can agree on unequivocally. I found myself blindsided by this game's characterization and dialogue. Scenarist Kazushige Nojima has always been an idol of mine–who can forget the last line of Final Fantasy X–but with Crisis Core, he has stepped his game up significantly. The emotional and dramatic impact of this game stands among the finest ever seen in interactive entertainment. Of course, the proceedings are boosted immeasurably by Square's traditional ultra high-end production techniques, not least of which is the best facial animation and lip-sync I have ever seen in any video game–let alone a handheld one! With that said, however, I was not expecting anything of this caliber. Advent Children and Dirge of Cerberus are put to *shame*.

> "I cringe every time I see that stupid slot machine pop up."

Casey: Totally. We've gotten used to seeing

handheld games being held to nearly the same standards as console games, but to see a handheld game *advance* the art so much was a shock. Crisis Core has the best real-time event scenes Square Enix has ever done; absolutely perfectly lip-syncing, hand gestures and facial animation bring the characters to life, and the script they're working with is top-notch. Crisis Core's main quest is fairly short, but it has at least as much as story as, say, Final Fantasy X-2, so it is a substantial work of fiction. And this story has far more impact than the usual Final Fantasy fare, since it doesn't follow the standard JRPG story formula at all. I don't think it's spoiling anything to say that if you've played Final Fantasy VII, you know that Zack's story is ultimately a tragedy. That's not to say that things will play out the way you expect, just that Nojima knows what you *think* will happen, and twists the knife at every opportunity. Crisis Core is packed with moments that I will never forget, and its last few hours floored me completely.

Nick: Agreed. I don't know that it's even possible to overdo the praise with regards to Crisis Core's scenario. Like you say, much of the shock may come from such a masterfully-writ tale being in the palm of your hand, but it is the elegant way the story functions within the FFVII mythos that is most astonishing. Nojima was working within an incredibly strict set of pre-defined continuity guidelines, not least of which is Zack's ultimate fate. We *know* what's going to happen, but we don't know *how.* Even during its lighter moments, the tone of the entire game is exquisitely melancholic, with composer Takeharu Ishimoto's magnificent "Theme of Crisis Core" hanging over Zack's head like a leitmotif of impending doom. Where did this Ishimoto guy come from, anyway?

Casey: I suspect that he leapt fully grown from Nobuo Uematsu's head, in the same manner as Athena was born of Zeus. Square has had a lot of turnover in their composer department lately, and while they still have some good ones, Ishimoto is the first since Uematsu that can write immediately catchy melodies that still pack a powerful emotional punch. It certainly helps that half the soundtrack consists of remixes from Final Fantasy VII (finally giving us that arranged album we've been waiting ten years for), but his original tracks are just as good. And I know you loved his work on Subarashiki Kono Sekai/It's a Wonderful World as well.

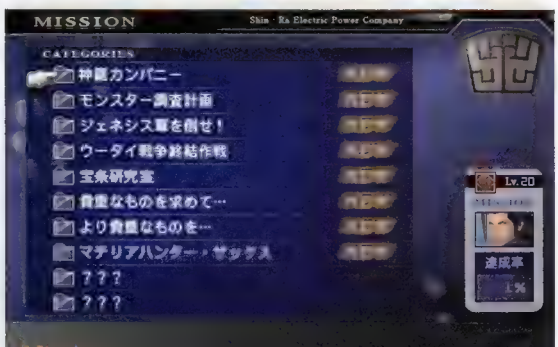
> "The story is funny, it's touching, and ultimately, it is heart-shatteringly tragic."

Nick: I did, and the complete 180° this score takes from Subarashiki's is just further testament to Ishimoto's ability. As wonderful as his score (and his worshipping at the altar of Uematsu) is, however, it is but one component among many that come together to make Crisis Core the spellbinding piece of interactive art that it is. Finally, we have a game that throws down the gauntlet and truly serves to highlight the difference between DS and PSP. Sure, it probably cost north of $10 million, but these unbelievable visuals (the best on PSP, save perhaps the upcoming God of War), the streaming audio, hours of voice, roughly 20 minutes of artifact-free, 30 fps CG...two years after launch, the game that defines the PSP has arrived. The best comparison I can make, ironically, is with the original FFVII on PSone: This is the game that

Digital Mind Wave

Digital Mind Wave, or DMW, is Crisis Core's central game system. During battle, slot machine-like tumblers representing Zack's scattered thoughts constantly spin, somestimes matching up and triggering a memory of someone important to him. Should three portaits line up together, a Limit Break corresponding to that character is unleashed; should two numbers match, one of your equipped Materia will level up; if all three numbers match as well, Zack himself will gain a level.

Facial animation and lip-syncing are stunning in Crisis Core



Missions

The 300 optional Missions provide the bulk of Crisis Core's non-story-related gameplay. Comparable to Final Fantasy XII's Guild Quests but with a great deal more content, new missions are triggered by advancing the story, talking with NPCs, and playing minigames. All feature an original dungeon map and require careful planning of Materia and accessories; by the time the final category of missions are reached, the player will find himself facing a level of challenge never before seen in the Final Fantasy series.

Screenshot support: Past to Present Online (http://ptop.aborman.com/)

Materia Fusion

Expanding the concept of Materia from Final Fantasy VII (equippable magic stones that allow one to use magic, special attacks, and latent abilities), the Fusion system allows Zack to actually make his own. By combining any two Materia (and later in the game, an item as well), a new one can be created that carries over the dominant abilities of its "parents". In this way, Zack's Materia can be highly customized, and a myriad of types created–included several magics and abilities new to the series.

FFVII 10th Anniversary PSP

In commemoration of Final Fantasy VII's tenth anniversary and the release of Crisis Core, Square Enix and Sony Computer Entertainment collaborated for the production of this special edition Ice Silver slim PSP. Limited to only 77,777 units (see if you can spot the connection), the set contained a copy of Crisis Core with a special cover, a metal strap fashioned after the iconic Buster Sword, and the aforementioned slim PSP with the FFVII 10th Anniversary logo silkscreened on the reverse.

makes one realize just what the platform is capable of. I think Square Enix missed a massive opportunity to have *the* PSP game of 2007 by not getting it out in America this year.

Casey: I can only pray that the reason they're taking so long is because they're adding in a Hard Mode. (Go ask the Kingdom Hearts team, Tabata–they can teach you how to do it!) Even if that's not the case, everyone should still be excited about Crisis Core, and not just because it's such a testament to the potential of the PSP. As Final Fantasy VII has shown us, while graphics fade quickly, great characters can make a lasting impression–and Crisis Core has some of the best. One piece of advice for our import-savvy readers: Crisis Core is quite import-friendly, and you could probably get through it without much trouble. But if you're not going to understand the dialogue...don't.

Nick: Although I would love to see all mainstream J-RPGs adopt a Kingdom Hearts-style difficulty select, my argument remains that the Hard Mode is there–it simply takes the form of optional missions. Nothing this blisteringly-difficult has been seen in the Final Fantasy series for fifteen years. The missions' bite-sized nature (rarely do they last for more than fifteen minutes) also makes for perfect portable gaming, while the main story is PS2-esque: A rare and potent fusion of console and handheld styles. With Crisis Core, we were promised a console-level extravaganza on PSP, and that's exactly what we got. I expected nothing less from the production values, but as our readers can probably surmise from this debate, the finest aspect of Crisis Core–its characters and story–came as quite a surprise. After the disappointments of AC and DC, I did not expect CC would have me weeping *man tears* upon its conclusion. I feel that this is the best product Square has released since Kingdom Hearts II, and represents the company's A-team at the top of their game. If you don't yet own a PSP, strongly consider buying one for Crisis Core.

Crisis Core -Final Fantasy VII-

Nick	Casey
score 9.5	score 8.5
+ Narrative and characterization as-yet-unparalleled in video games, incredible replay value, visuals virtually indistinguishable from the very best the PS2 has to offer	
– Main story is absurdly easy, DMW system is love-it-or-hate-it	

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Square
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	Now Japan, TBA US

"Two years after launch, the game that defines the PSP has arrived."

FFVII 10th Anniversary Potion

For perhaps the first time in gaming history, Square Enix teamed up with Suntory to release a ¥5000 limited edition beverage: The Final Fantasy VII 10th Anniversary Potion. Also limited to 77,777 units, the package featured the somewhat bitter Potion (packed with royal jelly and various herbs) in a collectible Shinra glass vial, as well as a phonebook-sized FFVII fan book. For those that balk at the idea of a $45 drink, canned versions adorned with all your favorite FFVII characters are available at convenience stores across the land.

ASH

(Archaic Sealed Heat)

They probably outsourced the acronym too.

words Casey Loe

Mistwalker is often mistakenly thought of as a development house, when in truth they handle only game design and production duties and outsource the rest. It's a system that worked great for Blue Dragon and looks to be working fine for Lost Odyssey, but things haven't turned out quite so well for ASH, their first title for the Nintendo DS. Mistwalker came up with plenty of good ideas, but the game studio that put them together (Racjin) fumbled much of the execution.

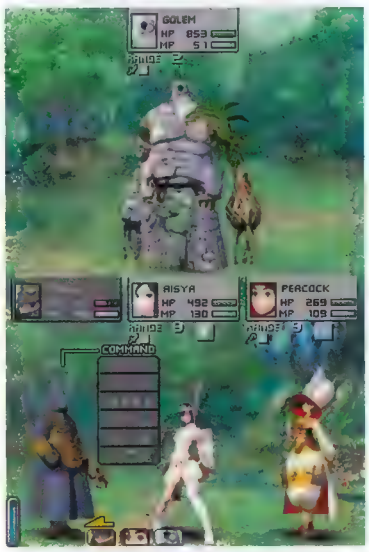
ASH opens with the coronation of beautiful 17-year old Queen Aisha, whose entire kingdom ends up being burnt to cinders before she can even put on her crown. That sounds like a pretty bad first day, but it could have been worse—while virtually everyone else in the castle is dead, they're somehow able to reform themselves out of their ashes. With a party composed of ash-versions of her former advisors and ash-soldiers in a wide variety of classes, Aisha sets out to save her kingdom, exact revenge, and figure out what the hell is going on. It's an unusual story, but not a bad one—its strange and random turns are reminiscent of Final Fantasy IV and other early 16-bit RPGs, from an era when imagination was more of a priority than plausibility.

Visually, the developers came up with a

"Nintendo may not have gotten the production values they were hoping for, but they did end up with a pretty solid game."

great concept for ASH. By pre-rendering all of the character animations and playing them over pre-rendered backgrounds, they effectively deliver next-gen-quality visuals on the DS. The characters models are well-animated and beautifully designed, and since all the data is stored on a cartridge, it's free of noticeable loading times. Of course, since everything is stored as FMV, packing it all in required a special 2-gigabit cartridge—double the previous record size of a DS game. But while the attack animations look great, the battle maps and character icons look terrible. The tiny stick-people icons have crude and confusing animations, and look completely out of place on the simple 3D terrain. In many ways, the crappiness of the maps almost negates the beauty of the battles, because the overall effect of ASH is now that it's a visual mess.

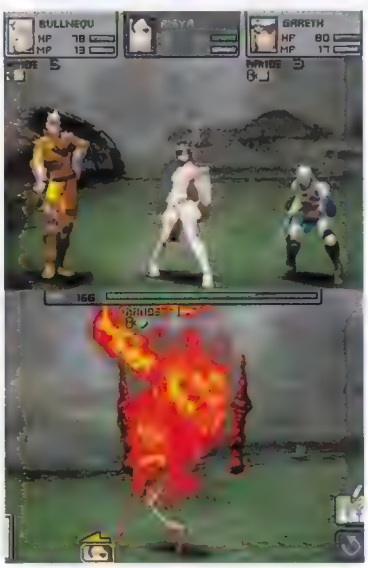
Nintendo may not have gotten the production values they were hoping for, but they did end up with a pretty solid game. ASH's battle system is actually quite clever, and achieves the rare feat of being both intuitive and original. When a battle begins, you organize your characters into teams of three, who can move independently of each other but share a turn, a pool of Action Points, and fight as a trio. Most of the strategy revolves around positioning your team members carefully; the closer you are to your foe, the more damage you'll deal and receive. (If a member is too far away, he'll have to rely on ranged spells and abilities, or resort to throwing rocks.) Since new enemies can teleport onto the battlefield at any time, there's a lot of tension between spreading your characters out to keep the weaker ones out of harm's way, and grouping them up so the weaklings aren't isolated and vulnerable to newly appearing foes.



Doesn't that sound fun? No? Well, maybe positioning strategy isn't the sexiest thing in the world, but it is pleasantly deep. And there's plenty of sexiness to be found in the wide variety of spells and combat abilities found in each class's rapidly growing skill trees. Since you regain all your HP and MP every time you level up, you can use your skills with wild abandon, giving you plenty of interesting combat options. Later in the game, you can even kill your own party members (after all, they're just piles of ash) to transfer one of their abilities to a party leader.

As much as I enjoy ASH's battles, they do feel somewhat padded—even when a battle is firmly in hand, you often have to waste a great deal of time hunting down and killing newly spawned foes. And since the battles drag on for so long, it could potentially cost you an hour of progress whenever you lose. Another annoyance is the game's interface, which is touch-screen only and requires you to double-tap menu options that are too small to hit consistently. This problem could have been easily solved by mapping simple functions to the DS buttons and D-Pad, but the developers decided that forcing players to tap specific pixels on the touch-screen is somehow more user-friendly than allowing them to press a button. Hmph.

ASH had the potential to be the start of a new and wonderful franchise, but that isn't gonna happen—the game sold so poorly that many stores had to slash its price by 50% within a few days of its Japanese release. After that spectacle, I doubt Nintendo will pick it up for a US release, but hopefully Atlus or XSEED can step in and save it. It may not be a great game, but it is a good one, and it deserves better than that.



ASH (Archaic Sealed Heat) — Score: 7.0

\+ Nice pre-rendered combat scenes, solid strategy mechanics

\- Overworld map is a mess, battles tend to drag on

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Mistwalker/Racjin
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

Artist Interview 001 :

Norihiko Hibino

words Nick Dinicolantonio

Welcome to the second installment of Play Japan's regular (though slightly delayed by Tokyo Game Show) game music series. We begin with a true renaissance man of the Japanese game music scene. Composer, producer, arranger, bandleader, club operator, and saxophone champion, Norihiko Hibino. You might not know his name, but you've probably heard his music. Hibino weaves together jazz, electronica, world music and everything in between in an eclectic, arresting mix of styles, heard in such games as Metal Gear Solid 2 & 3, Portable Ops, and Zone of the Enders. play sat down with Hibino in his studio to talk about his past, his present, and the future of game music.

play: I'd like to begin at the beginning. How did you decide you wanted to be a musician?
Well, I started to play saxophone when I was in junior high school, but not "officially" (laughs). I just played saxophone as a hobby–not seriously. In college I got a gig performing in clubs, but it wasn't enough financially. I was considering just working at a company–my parents wanted me to work at a big, established company. I didn't want to do that–I wanted to keep playing... So I went to live by myself and got a job as a truck driver just to make a living (laughs). During the day I was driving a truck, playing clubs at night. I did that for a year, saving up to go to school. That was the real start of my career.

I assume that was the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Was it difficult to get accepted?
That was actually really easy! I already knew music theory and so on.

Why did you choose jazz composition to major in?
Hmm...the main reason was that I wanted to study arrangement. The other is that jazz comp required the shortest time to graduate (laughs). Of course, there's also a performance major, and a film scoring major. I was thinking about majoring in film scoring, but it takes a *long* time. For performing...I could already do it (laughs). And if I wanted to, I could just take private lessons.

After graduating Berklee in 1997, you came back to Japan?
Actually, I worked at an AMC movie theater for a while (laughs). I worked as a theater manager in Kansas City. I moved there from Boston right after I graduated.

That explains why your English is so good!
Yes, the main reason was to practice my English! But financially, I also really needed money.

So, for a few years, you weren't involved in music at all?
Actually, I was playing a lot! I played in clubs in Kansas City. It's one of the few American cities in which jazz is really still alive...smooth jazz, real old-fashioned jazz.

What year did you return to Japan?
I guess that was...'98. I was in Kansas City for almost a year. The reason I came back, actually, is because AMC wanted to open a new multiplex in Japan.

And what led you to quit AMC? Being a theater manager must have made your parents happy!
Well, the theater was doing good business after a few months, and I felt I had done a good job. At the time, Konami was recruiting musicians on the web, and I sent in a demo tape...just a recording from my Berklee days. It was the very beginning of PlayStation 2 development, and they wanted composers with actual music skill.

Specifically jazz? I know Hideo Kojima's previous in-house composer, Tappy (Policenauts, Metal Gear Solid) also came from a jazz background, and Mr. Kojima is very fond of the jazz sound.
Yes. That was one of the reasons. Definitely jazz, but also they wanted me to write for orchestra.

Did you apply to any companies other than Konami?
No, only Konami. It was the only company I was able to find on the web taking applications (laughs).

You came from a rich, traditional jazz background and your first project composing was Metal Gear: Ghost Babel on GameBoy Color. Was it difficult going from a world of live instruments to three-note chip polyphony?
I did have to learn new technical skills, but the composition was really easy. On GameBoy you have three notes–in jazz you have three-part counterpoint. It was the same as jazz comp (laughs). It totally made sense to me.

On that project–and this is really a question that applies to all your work–did you leave the nitty-gritty of the sound programming to a code jockey, or do you do it yourself?
I really like to do my own sound programming now. At the time I was still learning, but one of the reasons I wanted to work at Konami is because they would obviously have a lot of equipment. If you want to make good music, you have to invest a *lot* in equipment. I couldn't afford that, but I knew Konami would buy all this stuff for me. So I learned programming when I came to Konami.

> "My parents wanted me to work at a big, established company. I didn't want to do that–I wanted to keep playing."

After Ghost Babel, did you move directly into Metal Gear Solid 2?
Yeah...but for a while, I was composing a bunch of really garbage tunes (laughs). I would give them to Mr. Kojima once in a while and get his feedback.

There was a lot of musical continuity between MGS1, which was Tappy's work, and 2. Was there a request from Mr. Kojima to retain a similar sound?
They wanted me to listen to the music of MGS1, but I was never told to follow it. Instead, they asked me, "what wasn't right about MGS1's music?". I wanted to fix it! I told them I thought the atmosphere was very good, but there was no strong musical *theme*. It was all just background music–ambient. I thought that was something weak about MGS1.

How specific were Mr. Kojima and Mr. Muraoka about the kind of sound they wanted? Did you have a lot of freedom, or were there clear instructions?
At the beginning, during MGS2, I didn't know anything about video game music (laughs). They said they wanted me to make it sound like Harry's The Replacement Killers. They would specify a track and say, "compose it like this". But after the project got busy, they never told me anything.

What was your favorite composition on MGS2?

The boss theme, "Yell 'Dead Cell'"... I just wanted something crazy. You know, because the boss characters were totally crazy. They're not regular people (laughs). I played the sax on that track.

Harry Gregson-Williams got most of the glory for the MGS2 soundtrack, even if you composed the majority of the music. Did you collaborate, or did he simply turn in compositions and you made them "fit"?
Harry sent me a bunch of separated tracks–split into drum, bass, etcetera. I would cut them, extend them, layer my own music on top, make them fit the scene. It was a lot of work in ProTools, although Harry uses Cubase.

Was it challenging to extend another composer's tracks?
As far as making new music from them, no. The music was good–it could fit anywhere. The difficult part was...all the tracks sound the same (laughs). The challenge was making a new mood from them, because I only had sixteen songs, about two minutes each. It was extending thirty minutes of music to three hours! I actually composed a lot of that stuff.

Your next project, I believe, was Zone of the Enders. What was it like moving from a jazz background into electronica?
Well, many people think I come from only a jazz background...of course that's true, but I was also influenced by techno. In '98 and '99, drum 'n' bass and club music were really hip. I was very influenced by the sound and wanted to incorporate those elements into my music. It wasn't difficult at all moving into that style, since it's some of my favorite stuff.

Was Zone of the Enders 2 a continuation of that sound?
I wasn't originally supposed to help on that project, actually (laughs). There were many composers working on the game, but at the end they just didn't have enough good songs. The last boss battle–Anubis, I think–I was told they needed a song to use there very urgently. I started composing at six or seven at night, and finished the track the next morning.

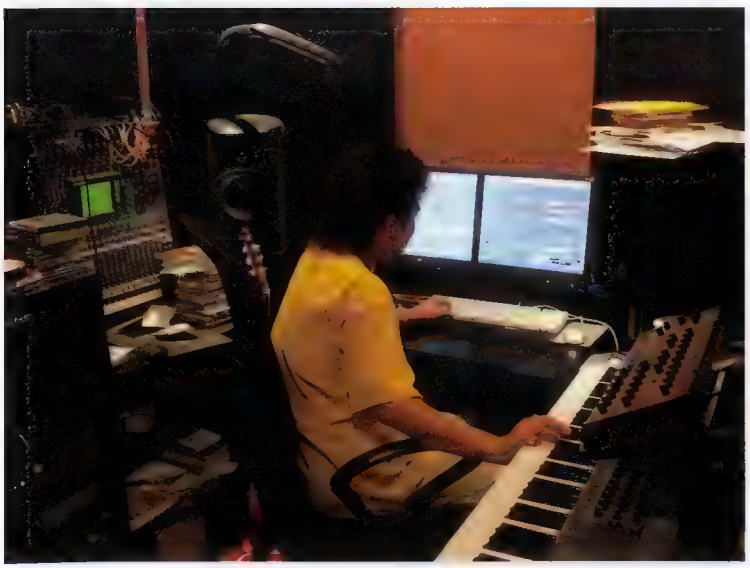
How long did a composer usually have to complete an entire game soundtrack at Konami?
It depends on how you're involved in the project, of course. If you're just doing cutscenes, it might be the last two or three months. In-game music usually takes a long time. There are so many arguments with programmers!

Let's say a game like MGS3 takes two years, roughly, to make. Are you composing for two years?
No, no! Not at all (laughs). I did many projects during that time. I did some Yu-Gi-Oh!, some BokTai...I don't remember everything. I did some beatmania stuff, too. I also did the cutscenes for The Twin Snakes, though the in-game music was by a Canadian composer from Silicon Knights.

You're independent now, but does working as a salaried composer at a company like Konami mean your bosses always find something for you to compose?
Oh yeah. I didn't have any down time. They always wanted me to be composing something.

That's interesting. I think the public always perceived you as specifically a member of Kojima Productions.
That's a weird thing, you know. Officially I could do any game at Konami, but Kojima Productions wanted to keep me to themselves (laughs). That was also my main frustration.

You wanted to be doing other types of games, too.



"I was told they needed [a last boss theme] very urgently. I started composing at six or seven at night, and finished the track the next morning."

Yeah. That's the reason I started my company, Gem Impact.

Did you feel trapped by the Metal Gear sound?
I didn't really feel that way, but there *was* a formula to the Metal Gear sound. The most important thing is that the music fits the game. I did like doing some of the hidden CODEC tracks in MGS3 that were like 60s and 70s pop music. I really, really enjoyed those.

I loved those.
I was thinking of just using my own name for them, but it wasn't *funny* enough...

Oh yeah, "Chunk Raspberry" and "66 Boys" and "Sergei Mantis" and so on...
If you know that era of music, the artist names are all parodies. "Sergei Mantis", for instance, was Sergio Mendes, "Chunk Raspberry" is Chuck Berry (laughs).

They're so different from the rest of the soundtrack–was that something you wanted to do? Whose idea was it?
It was actually Mr. Kojima's idea. He wanted them to sound like 60s pop, specifically before 1963. That means before The Beatles. No rock, really–a little surf rock, some Ventures sound, all American music. I enjoyed playing sax in dance halls, where I got to play those kinds of songs, so it wasn't hard to compose.

How about the iconic MGS3 theme song, "Snake Eater"? I heard that a theme song by another composer was actually completed before Mr. Kojima decided to have you take a crack at one.
Yes, Mr. Kojima and Mr. Muraoka wanted something different. Rika Muranaka composed the first theme song candidate (*ed.note–Ms. Muranaka also composed MGS1's theme, "The Best Is Yet To Come", and MGS2's, "Can't Say Goodbye To Yesterday"*), but for MGS3, Mr. Kojima had a really strong idea about the sound he wanted–a 60s James Bond sound. It's not a sound anyone can create. A lot of great musicians spent a long time trying to capture that sound, but it's not easy. It was really, really difficult to compose. Mr. Kojima wanted something like the main theme of The World Is Not Enough. He *loved* that song...he kept telling me "this is it". It had to have a really good melody, but at the same time it had to have atmosphere, like all the 007 songs. Ms. Muranaka was focusing on atmosphere, not melody. I asked her to re-compose and re-take many times, but it just didn't come out well. So, I composed a main theme as a demo, to explain how I wanted it to sound. Mr. Kojima didn't ask me to–I just did it by myself. And he liked it (laughs).

You also wrote the English "Snake Eater" lyrics, didn't you?
Yes, sometimes it's easier for me to compose in English.

Why is that?
It's because the *sound* of English is beautiful, and I can compose from that sound. But Japanese is boring.

MGS3 was your final game as a Konami employee, but you also worked on MGS Portable Ops.
Yes, I did that after I quit Konami. I have a team of composers now at my company, and we worked together on that.

That leads me into my next question–when did you quit Konami, and why?
Let's see. I quit in 2004. I actually quit on the release day of MGS3! One reason is I felt like I had done enough at Konami, and it was a good time to take the next step. The other reason is I wanted to use acoustic instruments in video games. When I was at Konami, I always had to draw up an estimate before I could use live musicians, and I had to get approval to hire them–even for just a demo. It was impossible. But with my own company, I can try out as many people as I want. Even before I joined Konami, I was thinking about starting my own company.

How many composers do you have working for you at Gem Impact?
I have two constantly-working composers, and two more working part time...many other temporary composers as well. I also get ten or twenty new demos from people every week. When I have enough I'll listen to them, then invite them all to a party. If I get to know them, I'll ask them to compose.

There are a lot of game music composers going independent now in Japan–Hitoshi Sakimoto, Nobuo Uematsu, Yasunori Mitsuda...they all have their own companies. Do you think independence might be the future of the Japanese game music industry?
Actually, there are very, very few successful independent composers.

It does seem that when a lot of composers go independent in Japan, they don't get a lot of work.
No. Usually not.

Why?
Well, in America, composers are usually sort of free agents. Most good composers are freelance. In Japan, companies want everything to be done by internal composers so that they own all the rights. That means they have intimate feelings towards their composers–they're family. If they leave the company, they're no longer family. It becomes really hard for them.

Has it been difficult for you to find work?
At the beginning, of course. When I started the company, nobody knew I composed Metal Gear. Everyone thought that Harry did it all (laughs). Outside Japan, I don't know, but inside Japan nobody knew. The first and second year at my company I was just trying to convince people.

Do you think you've succeeded in that now?
Yeah. There were people that were really fond of the Metal Gear music–for instance, the chief editor of Dengeki PlayStation (*ed. note–one of the largest two PlayStation magazines in Japan*), Seiichi Kuranishi, was kind of the first guy I met after I started my company. He introduced me to a lot of industry people. That allowed me to start working. He told everyone, "this is the guy that composed Metal Gear!". Sometimes it sounds better if somebody else says it for you!

Can I ask why you aren't doing MGS4?
The main reason is because they wanted to change the music style. Mr. Kojima wanted an ambient sound for MGS4. You could say MGS4 is more "realistic"...there isn't music everywhere. Also, at the time I left Konami, like I said before, I wasn't considered family anymore. After a while, though, when I had done some J-Pop and music for other industries, they took another look at me and thought, "he's getting famous" (laughs). I was very happy that they felt I was the one to do the MGS 20th Anniversary CD.

Tell me a little bit about the 20th Anniversary CD. You arranged an orchestral suite that was recorded in China. How does one go about hiring an orchestra (laughs)?
My recording director from Akashi works for King Records, and he has a lot of connections in China, so I hired him.

Did you conduct?
Yeah, I did!

It's a wonderful CD. Has it been selling well?
It's doing really great! On iTunes it was really a remarkable thing–Konami had never put anything on iTunes before, but the 20th Anniversary album stayed at #1 in soundtracks for a long time.

Norihiko Hibino poses with the charming young unofficial mascot of his studio, Cuffy.

Since this our inaugral game music interview, I'd like to ask you some general questions about the industry. In the 90s, there were hundreds of game music CDs being released every year in Japan. Today that number is significantly reduced. Why do you think that is?
I think game music fans have gotten older. They don't buy CDs anymore. There's also piracy now. In the 90s video games were a lot harder and fans were much more serious about them. Back then game fans would buy almost anything, but guys in their early 20s now are almost all casual game fans.

Do you think digital distribution might become a viable outlet for game music soundtrack sales?
Well, it's supposed to happen that way. I know a lot of composers for online games retain the rights to their music and offer it for download. I think it's a good way to do it.

How many copies does the average game music CD sell today in Japan?
If you can sell 5% the amount of copies the game itself sold, those are great sales. Metal Gear, for instance, was about 25,000. Not bad, really. Of course, in the case of Final Fantasy or something, it's totally different. Smaller games will sell about 5,000.

I want to get your thoughts on independent Japanese game composers becoming involved with games developed in the West. I personally think there's a huge amount of untapped potential there.
I'm trying to make that movement myself. One of the reasons that hasn't happened yet is, of course, language. However, I think sound mixing is the main reason. Do you know *ukiyo-e* (*ed. note–Japanese woodblock prints*)?

Sure.
In *ukiyo-e*, everything is flat and two-dimensional, but very detailed. There's no perspective. It's the same thing with sound mixes. The standard of Western sound has this depth and perspective, but the depth creates the sound, not the melody. Japanese game music is very melodic and detailed in comparison. In Western game music, sometimes there's *no* melody at all–it's just ambient. But Japanese game music is like *ukiyo-e*. It's *pechanko*–flat. Guys like Yuzo Koshiro and Kenji Ito, it's continuous melody. The melody just develops and develops. It's because it was the only way to create good music on old consoles.

Even so, there are a lot of game fans in the West who grew up on Japanese game music and love that melody-heavy sound.
It's the same thing. Japanese people don't know what's good about *ukiyo-e*. It took Western people praising *ukiyo-e* before Japanese realized. The other good thing about Japanese composers is that we've all worked at game companies, so we actually know how to program sound. We know how consoles work. It's really important...at the end of a game's development you might be asked to change things, or remove samples because allocated memory has been reduced, or the number of sound effects was increased. This sort of thing happens, but composers in the States would probably think, "we've already finished our job."

> "Officially I could do any game at Konami, but Kojima Productions wanted to keep me to themselves. That was also my main frustration."

There's so many great composers in Japan that are independent now, and don't seem to be working enough. I'd love to see some kind of umbrella management company that could put them in touch with Western developers.
I've been thinking about that. I've been thinking of forming a union of genius composers so that they can work with foreign developers.

That would really be ideal. You're doing the upcoming American game Commando 3, by Backbone/Foundation 9. How did that come about?
Well, Akira Yamaoka (*ed.note–Silent Hill series composer and producer*) is a good friend of David Chen from Foundation 9. I met David, and he's a great guy–he really liked my music and passed my demos to his friends. It happened that way.

As far as I know, you're the first Japanese game music composer to be ever work on an American game.
I guess so! I also just finished Boulder Dash Rocks on DS and PSP. That was really fun. What was most interesting was finding out the cultural differences (laughs). They wanted happy music, like a happy orchestra sound or ska, but Japanese composers think "happy music" means major keys. We have different ways of looking at the same things. The music was sometimes not what they were expecting.

Any other Western games you're composing for?
Not yet, but there's a Microsoft game–it's actually developed by From Software in Japan, but commissioned by Microsoft–a ninja action game I'm composing for. That's going to be my big project for the next year.

Is it a Tenchu game?
It's not Tenchu. It's not like Ninja Gaiden, either–it's more serious. It kind of looks like The Matrix (laughs). It's really incredible, with a really deep story.

You've also done work on TV commercials and anime. How did you get those jobs? Is it something you want to continue to do?
Yeah, I want to work as much as I can! I'll compose anything. I got all those jobs from friends and people I knew.

How about pop music? You recently did the track "Prelude to Suicide" for J-Pop

"When I started my company, nobody knew I composed Metal Gear. Everyone thought that Harry [Gregson-Williams] did it all."

artist Yuki Koyanagi.
I would love to do more pop music, but there's a *lot* of competition. Also...it takes time. Video games are very fast projects. You have to compose really fast. For me, the pop music industry seems so slow. I don't want to be told, "this isn't right", and then the singer can't really sing... (laughs).

With game music composition being as fast as it is, do you ever encounter a situation where you wish you had more time to finesse a track, but you have to move on?
A lot of other composers do wish they had more time and have to reschedule a lot, but I've never done that. I've found that if I have a meeting at 5PM and start composing in the morning knowing that, I always finish at 5 (laughs). I just know how long things will take. If I'm recording a guitar part and it seems to be taking too much time, I'll move on to the next thing. I don't think of it as being for myself–it's for the client. If they're happy, that's the goal.

How about your solo album, Akashi? I assume you were only wanted to please yourself. Did you find things taking longer?
Akashi was something I had been working on for a couple of years, so it was easy for me to shape. I really want to do another solo album again, but I just don't have enough time.

When you compose in a new genre–for instance, your recent Japan-only RPG Elvandia Story was high fantasy–do you prepare by doing a lot of research into that style?
I do do a lot of research. Film soundtracks, anime soundtracks, other RPG video game soundtracks. Other game soundtracks aren't really such a great reference, because the sound is so established. If I went that way, I would just be following an old-fashioned style. World music is also a good reference, and especially film soundtracks.

Who are some of your favorite film composers?
Of course Harry (laughs). He's really one of my favorite composers. Also Quincy Jones, John Williams, Basil Poledouris.

Do you listen to a lot of pop music?
Yeah, but not every day. I get a lot of demos and sample CDs that I just don't get a chance to listen to. Lately I like Corinne Bailey Rae from England, and I love Norah Jones and her producer Arif Mardin.

Are there any game composers you find yourself influenced by?
Game composers...I don't really get impressed by game composers. If there's one guy I could say has influenced me, it would be Toshiyuki Kakuta, who composes as "L.E.D. LIGHT" on the beatmania games. He does really, really hardcore techno, but only in that style. He doesn't do any other stuff, so he didn't get a lot of respect at Konami, but his techno is amazing (laughs).

Let's talk about game music concerts. This year you organized EXTRA (*ed. note–see the October play*), the largest non-Final Fantasy, non-Dragon Quest game music event ever in Japan.
Yes, with Masatoshi Nakamura from the record company 5pb. He organized the event, but left the arrangements for the live music to me. Some game composers can play live, but most can't (laughs). They're all used to keyboards and don't have the experience. I met them all one by one and explained what the live event would be like.

Were there any artists who turned you down because it was live?
Everyone wanted to play, because there's no other event like this, but Mr. Nakamura wanted it to be all game music legends (laughs).

Was it successful? Did it make money?
I think it broke even. It was sold out, but we spent a lot of money on it. All the live musicians we had to pay for, and the lighting, the sound...the venue was also very expensive.

Would you like to bring EXTRA to America?
Yes, we would like to. Mr. Nakamura and I are talking about it. One of the reasons I'm going to the Games Convention in Leipzig is to meet with Thomas Böcker, who organized the GC concert. I think we're going to do it next year here in Japan, too.

While on the topic of live music, tell me a little about your jazz club, Vanilla Mood. When did you open it? How did you get a location in Roppongi?
Last November. It's a funny story–I have a music school there, and one of the students worked at a club on the upper floor. It belonged to the K-1 fighter Bobby Ologun (laughs). Ologun had a kind of a scandal (*ed. note–assault and battery*) and the club went out of business, so the student asked me if I wanted to take it over. We're open every day and have jazz acts, bossa nova acts...I play there with my band sometimes.

How many projects is Norihiko Hibino working on right now?
Hmm...it's crazy (laughs). Including projects I'm producing, it's seven or eight. That includes games, CDs, some things for other recording artists, and some web site music. I'm very, very busy. Of course, I have to take care of my school and jazz club too! But it's a lot of fun.

Finally, is there anything you'd like to say to your fans in America?
I just wish I had more chances to speak with, or chat with, or e-mail my American fans–to communicate with them. I should really write my blog in English!

Thank you for a great interview.

Norihiko Hibino's Latest CDs

Note: The following CDs are Japanese imports, but can be ordered at amazon.co.jp or any number of web-based import music retailers.

Etrian Odyssey (Sekaiju no MeiO) Super Arrange Version

Yuzo Koshiro's synthy compositions haven't always translated into good instrumental arrangements, but his work on Etrian Odyssey sounds better than ever when given orchestral flair by Norihiko Hibino and the assortment of guest arrangers and performers who worked on this "Super Arrange Version". Roughly half of the thirteen tracks stick close to Koshiro's original compositions, replacing the digital blips with warm instrumental performances to great effect. The other half is less recognizable, as the guest arrangers put their own spins on the original material. "H." (an old-school Sega composer) has an insanely catchy piano-rock track, and Welsh opera singer Rebecca Evans has written and performed two vocal arranges in a new-agey style reminiscent of Enigma. The abrupt transition from orchestral arranges to vocal tracks to industrial techno can be a little jarring, but virtually all of the individual tracks are great. This is a must-import for my fellow Etrian Odyssey fans–you will weep when you hear the opening notes of "Labyrinth I: The Jade Green Forest" on a piano.

Metal Gear 20th Anniversary Music Collection

If you ever buy one Metal Gear CD in your life, you must buy this. Not only does it collect all the best Metal Gear tracks ever recorded–Rika Muranaka's MGS1/2 themes "The Best Is Yet To Come" and "Can't Say Goodbye To Yesterday", Harry Gregson-Williams's masterful arrangement of the Metal Gear Solid theme, and Norihiko Hibino's legendary, award-winning "Snake Eater" from MGS3, but also features a cavalcade of new music created specifically for this CD. First and most spectacular is a 14-minute orchestral suite by Hibino, "Metal Gear 20 Years' History: Past, Present, Future", which deftly, seamlessly, and chronologically stitches together two decades of classic MGS themes in a pyrotechnic symphonic explosion. Similarly arresting is a driving rock rendition of "Zanzibar Breeze", the opening theme from Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake, arranged by Mutsuhiko Izumi. You simply cannot go wrong here, and even lapsed fans of the series should strongly consider a purchase. Also available on iTunes.

WITCHBLADE

CAULDRON OF CHAOS

Words Dave Halverson

It came as no surprise after the explosive first volume that *Witchblade Volume 2* would be a classic in-betweener—a reprieve for the animators (and budget) while various story arcs that emerged from the first four episodes received a thorough flushing out, beginning right where Volume 1 left off with Masane squaring off against the Cloneblades, genetic clones of the Witchblade fused to human hosts. While the fight itself isn't all that eventful, the aftermath and subsequent reaction of Masane's attacker, Shioro Tsuzuki, is setting the stage for a meltdown of biblical proportions as Shioro's Cloneblade begins to consume its host. Guess fighting rogue Ex-Cons isn't the only part of Masane's job description.

The relationship between Masane's boss (Douji Group Industries' Bureau Chief Reiji Takayama) and rival NSWF forensic medicine expert Reina Soho (another Cloneblade) also comes to light as does exactly what transpired in the eye of that devastating earthquake when the Witchblade chose Masane as its new host. Meanwhile back on the lighter side of things, as the series continues to alternate between sci-fi and domestic issues, young Rihoko (Masane's six-year-old daughter) gets to know the new neighbors, including Yuusuke Tozawa—the scrappy wannabe journalist chasing his big scoop as he continues to inch closer and closer to the truth about the Ex-Con murders and the Witchblade. All tolled Volume 2 serves as a strong catalyst for what's to come with eight episodes down, 16 to go. Volume 3 will be a pivotal point in the series' run, marking the halfway point and determining whether or not the volumes will fluctuate in quality. For the series to end as well as it began Gonzo will need to alternate between exceptionally animated volumes like the first and the less refined story-driven volumes. Then again, even if this lower standard remains the norm, the melodrama and character designs will certainly see us through.

Witchblade score 8.0

\+ Story arcs galore; nice diversity between sci-fi and drama

\- Animation quality takes a sizeable hit

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	2
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	TV MA
Available	Now

"VOLUME 2 SERVES AS A STRONG CATALYST FOR WHAT'S TO COME..."

Cloneblades on the beach; beach balls generously included.

THE CURE LIES IN THE CURSE

MUSHI-SHI 蟲師

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HELL GIRL

BLAZE OF GLORY

地獄少女

words by Eric Grad

Sartre, the French existentialist, once said that "Hell is other people," a truism *Hell Girl*, from Funimation, takes great pains to illustrate. Each episode of *Hell Girl* tells a brief story of a victim and tormentor—from a callous business owner who stops at nothing, even murder, to advance her company, to a demented stalker whose idea of a gift is dead beetles and maggots. Thankfully, that's where Ai Enma, the preternaturally pale teen otherwise known as "Hell Girl," steps in.

The elegantly simple bargain Enma strikes with the victims would make Goethe proud: your soul for theirs. To elaborate, Enma will take appropriate [illegible] the sufferer's own soul will eventually be taken to hell as well, though not until death comes for the victim on its own.

These mini-Faustian bargains never fail to compel, as most episodes dial up a truly reprehensible human being, and it's always satisfying to see the bad guy receive appropriate comeuppance. *Hell Girl* does a wonderful job of immediately hooking you into an episode, for there's a lot of story to tell and not much time to do it in. The plots crackle along at a furious pace, burning through their arcs in a brilliant blaze of retributive glory.

With each episode a sort of mini-drama, Enma and her companions remain the sole constant through the series. Enma herself lives a sort of half-life in an exquisitely beautiful country bathed in eternal twilight, waiting for a poor unfortunate to summon her so that she can carry out her duties as Hell Girl. The visuals here, in the land of sunset, are perfect, evoking exactly the right tone and space to convey Enma's lonely life, which is in keeping with the show's exquisite animation and atmosphere elsewhere as well.

I'm intrigued by *Hell Girl*, finding myself wondering how she got such an awful job in the first place, and why she seems almost sad when executing justice on behalf of the powerless. I wish, though, that the series delved deeper into her and her companions' character and backstory. Sumptuous visuals and tight short stories can only entertain for so long—by the fifth episode of essentially the same formula, my attention started to wander. Here's hoping that volume two moves the story arc along faster, otherwise, Enma and company are going to find it difficult to get this soul into the boat for another ride down the river Styx.

Hell Girl score 8.5

\+ Friggin' fantastic animation; razor-sharp short stories

\- Friggin' slow character development; formulaic episode structure

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	1-4
Rating	TV-MA
Available	October

"THESE MINI-FAUSTIAN BARGAINS NEVER FAIL TO COMPEL..."

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Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex The Laughing Man

When *Ghost in Shell Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig* ended in Japan the fandom lived on, and it's easy to see why. This is without a doubt one of the most thought-provoking anime series ever created. It explores the line between consciousness and spirituality plumbing the depths of a future where our thoughts—our very eyes even—can be hacked.

The bulk of the population in 2027 has been fitted with cyber brains, but there's a complication that renders a small percentage of the procedure's recipients with brain stem sclerosis and imminent death. When a promising vaccine that serves the public trust but not the establishment's is buried in favor of nano-machine technology, which does little to nothing to stop the deadly disease, a cyber criminal deemed The Laughing Man perpetrates a series of unspeakable cyber crimes that are so masterfully executed even the covert ops' masterminds at the shadow group Section 9 couldn't bring him to justice. And then, one day, he simply disappeared. Fast forward six years and Togusa, one of the only human members of Section 9, stumbles on a lead and the case begins to crack wide open…

The Laughing Man is a compilation of scenes from the *Stand Alone Complex* series pertaining to the Laughing Man case, slightly altered to flow as a standalone 160 minute movie. The end result is a captivating slice of the series' most pivotal case that plays out like Miami Vice: The Cyber Years. The animation, although pooled from all over the series, is surprisingly cohesive—anime series often appear slightly altered between volumes—and the dialogue is utterly captivating, but in a solemn way. This isn't a "fun" show; it demands your undivided attention and focus, and even then you could watch it multiple times and still find new meanings strewn throughout the ever-tense changing dialogue. If you're still searching for answers, a second disc includes a director interview and more to help everything fit into place. Fan or not, *The Laughing Man* demands further investigation.

Ghost in the Shell SAC: The Laughing Man — score 9.0

+	Spellbinding, thought-provoking anime of the highest order
–	A cyber-babble super highway so complex it can make your brain hurt

Released By	Bandai Entertainment/Manga Ent.
Volume	Compilation
Running Time	160 minutes
Episodes	NA
Available	Now

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Legends of the Dark Crystal

Crystal Chronicles

Tokyopop's done it again. If you had to hunt up your copy of *Labyrinth* after reading T-Pop's excellent manga extension of the story last year, get ready to do it again after reading *Legends of the Dark Crystal*, a prequel to Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal*. As a standalone manga, Legends works well enough, but to fans of the movie, it will be well-nigh irresistible.

Set a century before the events of the film, Legends again takes two Gelflings (think elves with smaller ears) as its protagonists. The evil Skeksis, a race of wicked bird-men, have begun to capture every last Gelfling to be used to make their everlasting essence. Amid the devastation, two Gelflings escape the destruction of their villages and find safety in another village, only to be tracked to their new haven and forced to stay and fight.

Much of the charm of the film was in the stunning (for its time) puppeteer work and special effects, which distracted the telling of a complex and compelling story. As manga that barrier disappears, letting you experience the story and the textured fantasy world Henson created to its fullest, a definite positive. I find myself amazed at the sheer amount of thought put into this place—Henson took a page out of Tolkien in terms of creating fantasy realms and it shows in the manga.

Legends is an excellent continuation of a T-Pop tradition of releasing Muppet/Henson related manga. Can a manga prequel or sequel to John Denver and the Muppets: A Christmas Together be far behind? Be afraid.

Read it if... you're a Jim Henson fan (and who isn't?)

Legends of the Dark Crystal	Score: 9.0
Publisher	Tokyopop
Volume	1
Story	Barbara Randall Kesel
Art	Heidi Arnhold & Max Kim
Genre	Fantasy
Available	Now

Project DOA

Anything but Dead on Arrival

Take every cheesy pulp fiction device you can think of—mummies coming back to life, mysterious volcanic islands, Amazon warrior-princesses—squish 'em all together, illustrate the result, and you end up with the self-depreciatingly titled *Project DOA* from Tokyopop. A curious blend of hackneyed clichés, it goes down smooth and leaves you wanting more—obviously the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Wunderkind Dylan Oliver can seemingly solve any problem, build any machine. He makes his bones as part of a weapons research laboratory, until an experiment goes tragically awry. Sick with grief, Dylan decides to make amends by attempting to literally resurrect the dead—Dr. Frankenstein, eat your heart out. To build a machine capable of this feat, Dylan travels the world searching for the right tools and ingredients, giving first-time graphic novel author Jeff Nodleman an excuse to show us all sorts of exotic locales.

Long on action and told at a dazzlingly breakneck pace, Nodelman's clever manga doesn't give you much time to breathe, let alone get to know any of these characters very well. Characters in pulp novels aren't supposed to be three-dimensional, of course, but if you're going to try and transcend the genre by stitching together a pastiche of wildly divergent scenarios, why not go whole hog and tell us a little about your heroes as well? Still, I'll be tuning in next time, if only to see what trouble Dylan and his team get themselves into in volume two.

Read it if... you like your juice and your manga extra pulpy.

Project DOA	Score: 7.5
Publisher	Tokyopop
Volume	1
Story	Jeff Nodelman
Art	Wagner Fukuhara
Genre	Action/Adventure
Available	November 13

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Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

Gore Verbinski
Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, Keira Knightley
Buena Vista Home Entertainment
PG-13

The pillaging, plundering capper to Disney's juggernaut trilogy arrives on DVD with the staple swagger and swordplay of Captain Jack, as well as answers to lingering Pirate plotlines and, of course, Keith Richard's cameo as papa Jack.

Superbad

Greg Mottola
Michael Cera, Jonah Hill
Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
R

Plenty of dick jokes and a bunch of other stuff we can't even print. Need we say more? Okay, this Judd Apatow (*The 40-year Old Virgin, Knocked Up*) produced piss-yourself-funny raunchy romp is hilarious from start to finish and only gets better with multiple viewings.

Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

The wizarding wunderkind might have moved on in the literary world, but he's still wand-deep in Death Eaters and Hogwart's hijinx in this fifth theatrical chapter. Helena Bonham Carter's Bellatrix Lestrange and Imelda Staunton's Dolores Umbridge provide some of the best Potter performances to date.

The Bourne Ultimatum

Directed by: Paul Greengrass
Starring: Matt Damon, Julia Stiles
Released By: Universal Studios Home Entertainment
Rated: PG-13

The best Bourne yet comes home with adrenaline-pumping action and a twist-at-every-turn plot. The amazing chase sequences and Bourne's rapid-fire fighting style offer perfect fodder for DVD junkies who enjoy re-watching slick scenes in slo-mo.

Stardust

Matthew Vaughn
Claire Danes, Charlie Cox
Paramount Home Entertainment
PG-13

This one failed to sprinkle its magic on the box office, but its charming blend of fantasy, sci-fi and comedy is destined to crown it a *Princess Bride*-like cult classic. Michele Pfeiffer's wicked (and wicked hot) performance alone earns this one a spin in your home theater.

Live Free Or Die Hard

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

Older, balder and crankier John McClane returns for his best wrong-place-right-time outing since he leapt off Nakatomi Plaza. Over-the-top action and excellent comedic chemistry, courtesy of Justin Long, bring the summer blockbuster into your living room.

Ratatouille

Directed by: // Starring: // Released By: // Rated:

Adding the latest Pixar blockbuster to your collection is a no-brainer; they could animate a pile of dung and we'd watch. Lucky for us they chose a rodent chef—voiced by the hilarious Patton Oswalt—for this rat-out-of-sewer romp. Brad Bird (*The Incredibles, The Iron Giant*) behind the lens doesn't hurt.

Casshern

Directed by: Kazuaki Kiriya // Starring: Kumiko Aso, Akira Terao
Released By: Dreamworks Home Entertainment // Rated: Not Rated

This anime and manga-inspired live action sci-fi thriller's cover boasts a quote stating it's "better than both *Matrix* sequels put together." We're not sure about that—the films have absolutely nothing in common—but *Casshern* is one of the more surreal CGI/live-action films to ever emerge out of Asia. Let's call it "uniquely beautiful and compelling" instead.

TV on DVD

Essential Marathon-Viewing

Metalocalypse Season 1

Warner Bros. Home Video

Season 1 of the heavy metal animated Adult Swim series hits home like a basket of killer kittens. Death metal, awesome animated violence and adult comedy somehow come together for the best mature animation you'll find stateside. We're not worthy!

24 Season 6

Fox Home Entertainment

Day six in the life of Jack Bauer delivers the expected white-knuckle action, plot twists, terrorist threats, dead CTU agents, and torture-dealing interrogations. Plus, Jack's baddie daddy shows up to make his day even worse than usual. Better start watching; day seven starts soon...tick, tock, tick, tock...

Lost Season 3

Buena Vista Home Entertainment

This *Castaway*-meets-*X-files*-meets-*Lord of the Flies* series' brilliant blend of action and mythology will likely have you viewing this set in one giant edge-of-your-seat marathon. The 90 minute season finale alone provides more "oh shit!" moments than most series offer their entire run. Don't forget to take a bathroom break!

The Simpsons Movie

Directed by: David Silverman // Starring: Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner
Released By: Fox Home Entertainment // Rated: PG-13

The series might be in a creative slump but you'd never know it from Springfield's favorite family's big screen debut. The whip-smart pop-culture-skewering writing will remind you why you started watching this adult-aimed animation nearly 20 years ago. Damn, are we that old?!

Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Directed by: Ridley Scott // Starring: Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young
Released By: Warner Home Video // Rated: Not Rated

Sure it's already received a "director's cut," but this 25th anniversary edition of the sci-fi cult fave promises to be the director's cut of director's cuts. We're talking five discs of never-before-scene footage and extras, and an assurance from Ridley himself that this is indeed the definitive version.

12_07 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The Tower of Babble

Almost every game I've played this year has left me wanting ... less. I get near the end, and I just want it to, well, end already. Why is that?

Call of Duty 4 took me at the very most eight hours to finish. I was so satisfied, so ready to go again, so enamored of so much of that game that its length became irrelevant. There was no fat needing cut. It felt absolutely right. The context of its design did not require more game.

Should a first-person shooter or really any genre outside of a traditional RPG be more than 10 hours to somehow justify its value? Most the time if an action game leans toward the longer side of what is a typical play-through, this means annoying backtracking or repetitive level design or too much of the same combat scenarios dialed up to artificially extend length.

Who decided what the magic number is for a pleasing game experience?

If I were to read off the current gauge of modern gaming, I'd prefer every game to be less than 10 hours. What I wouldn't give for someone to risk everything and successfully prove that 5 hours is enough to make me walk away from the experience properly entertained. Maybe that's not possible, but I need someone to convince me otherwise.

Super Metroid is one of my favorite games, which I played again over the weekend on Virtual Console, and finished in one sitting, under 5 hours. It's been years since I had the pleasure of guiding Samus through her somber alien world, and there's nothing about the game today I wouldn't love to see reimagined. Could that same scope of design survive if translated into 3D?

Wait a sec: gotta factor in the price point, right? Sixty dollars is not a comfortable thing to spend on a game, and somehow we've gotten into this rut that a game's value is appointed by the hour. And don't forget the amount of content that then somehow translates to length of play that somehow automatically translates to the impact the game has on your brain convincing you your money is well spent.

Well, I'm convinced that Pac-Man: Championship Edition is one of the games this year that made me happiest to be playing it, and I probably spent more hours with it than any game this year, and I spent 10 dollars to achieve that happiness.

Excuse me a second while I do the math.

Well shit, I'd have to say Pac-Man Championship Edition should have been priced at 60 dollars, for sure.

But come on! That's silly talk, because the game doesn't have a story or polygons or guns and progressive level structure that accounts for 10-12 hours of input, so it is naturally 10 dollars, because that's what Microsoft decided these games would cost on Live Arcade. No one in their right mind would pay 60 dollars for an arcade game.

But then again, who's in their right mind trying to figure exactly what a game should cost, or how much content should really be the standard, or just how important is online play? Does all the sudden not having co-op make a game suck? I've been told by a number of people that Call of Duty 4 already is questionable because there's no co-op, and Gears of War has co-op, and so does Halo 3... Are you kidding me? Hey, at least it has online play so you can get your endless hours of value!

The current climate of discourse states that the value of a game is determined by the sprawl of its content. Is the beauty of a painting defined by the size of the canvas?

This topic is a preposterous mess to unravel if you were to really slice into it with an academic knife; just look at the massive convolution of what goes into building the modern game, and what a modern game should be and needs to be. Nobody seems to know what the hell is ultimately the answer, confusing paradigm shifts with marketing BS with the bitter discourse pouring from the flaps of...

Anyways, I'm just throwing out random strings of confusion. Grab on and pull harder and help me figure this whole mess out.

> "Almost every game I've played this year has left me wanting... less."

While you're at it, take a look at Everyday Shooter. I downloaded this low-profile "shooter" at the request of a friend who said it's the best game he's played this year.

And now I see that it very well may be a touch of greatness to a specific frame of mind. The game's singular creator, Jonathan Mak, states that he wanted something pure and free from the pollution of modern design. "What if God made you a little glowing dot... and music in your head had nowhere to go but out?"

I hesitate to talk about the game much, because I haven't played it to completion, and I don't quite get it yet. But then I think, What if I stop wanting so hard to analyze it and put a score on it and question my 10 dollar purchase and try to explain it to people I want to experience it? And just be with the game, this small, abstract, beautiful, musically touched game.

Something happened playing Everyday Shooter for the first time that I suppose I could describe as hypnotic, but what an overused and meaningless word that is. The connection to the heartfelt guitar sounds and manipulation of simple object patterns onscreen became... spiritual perhaps? That's a pretty big word, but resonating the right emotion at the right time is pretty big too.

Everyday Shooter captures the soul of gaming. It's OK to expect length and value out of a game, but I hope someone out there, someone making games, felt what I felt playing Everyday Shooter and realizes that real value doesn't weigh on the mechanical hands of a clock.

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